

Husband, Be a Gentlemen Chapter 61-81

Chapter 61

The emperor's question was a hidden dagger.

Pei Jin didn't know how long the cold wind in his heart stirred.

'Imperial father, I promise my heart will not change,' Pei Jin said.

'That's good,' the emperor said and left the calligraphy room.

The emperor walked past the kitchen and the past haunted him.

'Big brother, I learned how to grill meat in Southern Jiang...' Prince Chen Nan said.

That one memory ruined his happiness to hear his ninth daughter-in-law was pregnant.

The emperor's imperial guards and imperial physicians escorted the emperor back to the palace.

Pei Jin's manor returned to its lively atmosphere.

'Your grandfather!' Xiao Zai cursed. 'Xiao Hui you purposely threw me over the wall! If I had landed on the emperor then I would have been cut into pieces! If you see me as an eyesore, you can tell me but don't harm me like this. Say something. Don't think I'll spare you if you don't say anything.'

Xiao Zai chased Xiao Hui around the courtyard.

'Those two people are going to make me laugh to death,' Yan Shi Ning said. She rubbed her stomach and pulled Pei Jin's sleeve. 'Pei Jin, what's wrong? What did the emperor say to you in the calligraphy room?'

Pei Jin held Yan Shi Ning's hand. 'Nothing. Your father-in-law asked me to behave.'

‘Did the emperor find out about something?’ Yan Shi Ning asked.

Pei Jin shook his head. ‘Perhaps someone said something to imperial father.’

Suddenly Pei Jin’s guard, Xiao Ting entered the courtyard.

‘What happened in the palace?’ Pei Jin asked.

Xiao Ting reported to Pei Jin about the court officials’ conflict over who should be the crown prince and left the courtyard.

Yan Shi Ning shivered, she thought Huang Guo would only spread the secret about her pregnancy.

‘Why would Huang Guo want to cause trouble in the palace?’ Yan Shi Ning asked

‘It appears I’ll need to visit Huang Guo,’ Pei Jin said coldly.

Yan Shi Ning knew Pei Jin wasn’t upset about Huang Guo, he was upset about the emperor’s reaction. Pei Jin was also the emperor’s son but the emperor’s warning showed that the emperor never wanted to give Pei Jin the opportunity to inherit the kingdom. She held Pei Jin’s cold hand and thought the old AH was lower than her neglectful and opportunistic father.

Pei Jin patted Yan Shi Ning’s hand. ‘Shi Ning, it’s alright. I’m used to it. You can’t expose your deadly temper.’

‘Pei Jin...’ Yan Shi Ning said.

‘Um?’ Pei Jin asked.

‘Pei Jin, why don’t we force that old AH who doesn’t want you to be his heir... have to open his mouth and beg you to be the crown prince?’ Yan Shi Ning asked.

‘Then what?’ Pei Jin asked.

‘Then you’ll tell the old AH you don’t want to be his heir and let him be angry to death,’ Yan Shi Ning said.

Pei Jin hugged Yan Shi Ning. ‘Wife, that’s a good plan. Do you believe in your husband that much?’

‘Don’t think that I don’t know what you’re thinking,’ Yan Shi Ning said.

Pei Jin thought his little lion was more intelligent by the day. He kissed her and travelled to Huang Guo’s manor.

Later at Huang Guo’s manor, Pei Jin and Huang Guo sat opposite each other in Huang Guo’s calligraphy room.

‘Ninth prince, you must have heard what happened in the palace today,’ Huang Guo said.

‘Elder Guo, what are you alluding to?’ Pei Jin asked.

Huang Guo looked at Pei Jin’s cup of tea on the table. ‘The tea is prepared and ready for you to drink.’

Pei Jin understood Huang Guo’s motive. ‘In this period if I drink tea then I won’t be able to sleep.’

Huang Guo drank his tea and thought Pei Jin was more cunning by the day.

‘Elder Guo, you’re not young anymore,’ Pei Jin said. ‘It’s not good for Elder Guo to drink too much tea.’

Huang Guo’s back stiffened, he knew Pei Jin was warning him. ‘Ninth prince, what did the emperor say to you at your manor?’

Pei Jin laughed coldly. ‘Imperial father said a few words... Elder Guo wouldn’t be pleased if you heard what imperial father said.’

Huang Guo grimaced.

Pei Jin changed into a more comfortable sitting position. 'Elder Guo, it's useless for your heart to waste energy.'

Huang Guo couldn't see through Pei Jin's thoughts. 'Ninth prince, do you have any grievances? But until the end, no one knows who the winner is and who the loser is. All the emperors in the past snatched the throne from their brothers.'

Huang Guo was a fool to have underestimated Pei Jin as someone who could easily be manipulated. After the harvest festival incident, Pei Jin's manor was unaffected and Huang Guo realised Pei Jin was more cunning and stronger than he thought. Also, Huang Guo didn't believe the news about the empress killing herself. He knew Pei Jin was involved to avenge his daughter's death.

Huang Guo's spies in the palace confirmed his suspicions about the empress' death. Then he heard news about Yan Shi Ning being ill, he wasn't fooled because he knew Yan Shi Ning was a healthy woman so he sent his daughter-in-laws to Pei Jin's manor to see if Yan Shi Ning was pregnant. He was happy to hear his daughter-in-laws confirmed Yan Shi Ning's pregnancy.

After Huang Guo heard rumors about Pei Zhang's supporters want to recommend Pei Zhang to be the crown prince, he knew it was the right opportunity for him to see the emperor in the palace. Everything had happened according to Huang Guo's plan until Pei Jin visited him and warned him not to interfere anymore because the emperor had no intentions to let Pei Jin become the crown prince.

Huang Guo didn't lose hope because no emperors were given the throne, the throne was always conquered. But Pei Jin's indifference to the throne made him feel frustrated and powerless.

'Ninth prince, are you weary of me?' Huang Guo asked.

Pei Jin smiled coldly.

'Ninth prince, you don't have to be weary of me,' Huang Guo said. 'I promise I only want to help raise you to the highest position. All I want

in return is that you promise to protect everyone in the Guo Household. Ninth prince, you know if seventh prince becomes crown prince then no one in the Guo Household will survive.'

'No one can predict imperial father's heart,' Pei Jin said.

'It doesn't matter if the emperor's heart only sees one option,' Huang Guo said. 'Ninth prince, earlier I told you it's precedent that emperors have always snatched the throne.'

'Elder Guo, how do you plan to snatch the throne?' Pei Jin asked.

Huang Guo knew Pei Jin was forcing him to reveal his plan. Of course snatching the throne involved a strong army force. It was true Huang Guo had a secret army force but he wouldn't dare use his army force unless someone related to him like his adoptive grandson secured the crown prince position.

Huang Guo dipped a finger in the cup of tea and wrote his plan on the table.

'Ninth prince, what do you think?' Huang Guo asked.

Pei Jin nodded his head. 'It's good.'

'Ninth prince, what do you plan to do?' Huang Guo asked.

'Me?' Pei Jin asked. 'Elder Guo, I think I still prefer to be a carefree prince.'

Huang Guo was too angry to speak.

Pei Jin looked innocently at Huang Guo. 'Elder Guo, your decision to use a chess piece at this time isn't wrong. It's a pity you used the wrong chess piece.'

'You!' Huang Guo said.

‘Elder Guo don’t be angry,’ Pei Jin said. ‘Besides, Elder Guo is used to my way of speaking. It isn’t easy to drink tea here. Elder Guo, I’ll leave first.’

After Pei Jin left, Huang Guo’s third son Fan appeared from behind a screen.

‘Father, Pei Jin is despicable!’ Fan said. ‘Father, you lowered yourself in front of him but he didn’t take the bait. I don’t believe he has no desire to be emperor.’

Huang Guo grinded his teeth. ‘He only doesn’t like being controlled. Third son, wait and see. I’m certain he’ll make a move.’

‘Father, what should we do now?’ Fan asked.

‘Wait,’ Huang Guo said.

‘Wait?’ Fan asked.

‘Wait for him to eliminate Pei Zhang,’ Huang Guo said. ‘After the throne is his then we’ll make our move.’

Inside the horse carriage, Pei Jin looked up at the moon and smiled. He didn’t expect Huang Guo had a secret army. But he knew apart from him, Huang Guo didn’t have anyone else to cooperate with Huang Guo. So there was no reason for him to allow Huang Guo to use him.

Chapter 62

The emperor decreed to keep the crown prince position vacant.

At Consort Mu’s chamber, Pei Zhang threw a cup of tea at a palace maid’s face.

‘You dare to let me drink hot tea?’ Pei Zhang asked.

The palace maid knelt on her knees in front of Pei Zhang.

Consort Mu stopped Pei Zhang from kicking the palace maid.

‘Xiao Zhang!’ Consort Mu said and signalled the palace maid to leave.

‘Xiao Zhang, you’re becoming more impatient by the day,’ Consort Mu said. ‘If you had kicked her, she would either die or be crippled. Do you want a rumor to spread about your cruelty? Now is a critical period. How can you lose control of your anger? I know you’re feeling the situation is unfair but you need to be patient and endure.’

‘Endure?’ Pei Zhang asked. ‘In the eyes of the citizens ninth brother has a perfect reputation. If I endure any longer then it’ll be me who’ll be kowtowing in front of ninth brother!’

‘If you don’t control yourself then it’s certain you’ll be kowtowing in front of your ninth brother!’ Consort Mu said.

‘Mother, what are we going to do?’ Pei Zhang asked.

‘Think about it,’ Consort Mu said. ‘Between your ninth brother and tenth brother, who did you think is more suitable?’

‘Tenth brother?’ Pei Zhang asked.

‘In the past your tenth brother had your imperial father, his imperial mother’s family support and the citizens’ admiration,’ Consort Mu said. ‘Where is tenth brother now?’

‘He lost everything and died,’ Pei Zhang said.

‘That’s right,’ Consort Mu said. ‘He had everything and lost. So we don’t need to fear someone like your ninth brother.’

‘Mother, you’re right,’ Pei Zhang said.

‘Xiao Zhang, I know what you’re worrying about,’ Consort Mu said. ‘You feel threatened that your ninth brother has a good reputation, his wife is pregnant and he’s gaining support from court officials.’

‘That’s true,’ Pei Zhang said.

‘Xiao Zhang, you don’t need to worry about those minor obstacles,’ Consort Mu said.

Pei Zhang listened carefully to his mother’s reasons.

‘Xiao Zhang, you can slowly improve your reputation,’ Consort Mu said. ‘Those court officials aren’t foolish. They know in the end you’ll be the crown prince so they weren’t dare to commit all their resources to support your ninth brother. What’s important is military power!’

‘But Huang Guo’s been too dormant for years... what if Huang Guo and ninth brother join their resources?’ Pei Zhang asked.

‘Xiao Zhang, do you still not understand your imperial father?’ Consort Mu asked.

‘Imperial father?’ Pei Zhang asked.

‘Your imperial father is someone who wants to control everything within his hand,’ Consort Mu said. ‘In recent years your imperial father feels he is slowly losing control of everything. It makes him angry enough to be mentally tired and as a consequence his health has declined. Do you think he wanted the harvest festival incident to happen? For Yan Shi Ting to fake a pregnancy? Your tenth brother to die? The empress to die? In front of everyone your imperial father acts like he’s coping but the truth is he’s grieving, their deaths have a deep impact on the state of his mind and health. He’ll be lucky to live another three years.’

‘Mother, is that true?’ Pei Zhang asked.

‘Xiao Zhang, do you think that Gentleman Zheng is the only imperial physician who is on our side?’ Consort Mu asked.

‘Who else?’ Pei Zhang asked.

‘Your imperial father’s most trusted imperial physician, Gentleman Tao,’ Consort Mu said.

Pei Zhang thought his mother was impressive.

‘Xiao Zhang, if you were in your imperial father’s position would you give the throne to the first son who is strong and has support from the most of the court officials or would you give the throne to the second son who is weaker and has no military power?’ Consort Mu asked.

‘Of course I would give the throne to the first son,’ Pei Zhang said.

‘That’s right,’ Consort Mu said. ‘Your imperial father is someone who values control. Of course he wants to give the throne to the son that has control over the imperial court and military power. Even though your imperial father isn’t completely satisfied with you, he’s not foolish to give the throne to your weaker ninth brother.’

‘Mother, you’re right,’ Pei Zhang said. ‘Imperial father isn’t foolish to give the throne to ninth brother. Because after ninth brother sits on the throne, his supporters will turn against ninth brother and seize the throne. Imperial father wouldn’t want his family dynasty to end with ninth brother.’

‘Don’t forget your imperial father suspected Huang Guo’s ulterior motive long ago and that’s why Huang Guo lost your imperial father’s favor,’ Consort Mu said. ‘Now do you understand why I asked you to endure?’

‘Mother I understand,’ Pei Zhang said. ‘If imperial father sees Huang Guo cooperating with ninth brother, imperial father will hate ninth brother even more and ninth brother will die pitifully.’

‘It’s good you understand,’ Consort Mu said.

‘Mother, what about Yan Shi Ning’s pregnancy?’ Pei Zhang asked.

‘I couldn’t stop the heavens blessing her stomach with a prince,’ Consort Mu said. ‘Your ninth brother’s fate is too good. He hasn’t been married for long but already has an heir.’

Pei Zhang felt ashamed he had many wives but didn't have an heir. His official wife lost their son when she was seventh months pregnant and their second child was a girl... at least his second wife was pregnant and perhaps he would finally have an heir.

'Mother, didn't you use Fu Gui to poison her?' Pei Zhang asked. 'How is it possible she's pregnant?'

'Perhaps I didn't use enough Fu Gui or someone found the remedy for her,' Consort Mu said.

Pei Zhang wasn't satisfied enough to eliminate the Yan Manor, the empress and Pei Lam, he wanted to eliminate Yan Shi Ning too.

'Mother, now I understand why Gentleman Tao was willing to help you by giving the forbidden Fu Gui incense sticks to the empress to give to Yan Shi Ting to use in the Yan Manor without the empress knowing they were poisoned,' Pei Zhang said.

'Your imperial father wanted a grandson for a long time,' Consort Mu said. 'If your ninth brother's wife gives him a son and your second wife gives you a second daughter then I'm not certain what your imperial father's final decision will be.'

'Mother, what do we do about Yan Shi Ning?' Pei Zhang asked.

Chapter 63

'I don't know why your imperial father favors your ninth brother's wife more than your second wife,' Consort Mu said.

'That's right!' Pei Zhang said. 'Imperial father even visited ninth brother's wife and gave her two of his trusted imperial guards. I don't know who imperial father is weary of.'

'Who else can it be but us?' Consort Mu asked. 'I wanted to send our spies to your ninth brother's manor but because of your imperial father,

I can't anymore. It doesn't matter who wants to harm Yan Shi Ning. If anything happens to Yan Shi Ning while she's pregnant, your imperial father won't spare us.'

'What do we do?' Pei Zhang asked. 'Do we stand by and watch her give birth?'

'What else is there?' Consort Mu asked.

'Mother...' Pei Zhang said.

'Pei Zhang, don't worry,' Consort Mu said. 'I have a way to deal with Yan Shi Ning.'

While Consort Mu and Pei Zhang were scheming, the bullied palace maid Xiao Nu was sobbing in a corner of the palace gardens. Her face was burning from the hot tea. She wanted to find a soothing cream but she knew no one would give her the cream because they feared Pei Zhang would punish them. Besides, she was too beautiful and the other palace maids were jealous of her and happy her face was scorched.

Xiao Nu cried for half a day and finally someone pitied her and gave her the soothing cream. It took away the stinging pain but she knew her face would scar.

Wang Fu Mu was walking through the gardens but stopped after he heard someone sobbing pitifully.

'Who do you serve?' Wang Fu Mu asked.

Xiao Nu stopped crying, stood and bowed to Wang Fu Mu.

'Official Wang, I'm Xiao Nu and I serve Consort Mu,' Xiao Nu said.

Wang Fu Mu's eyes brightened. 'What happened? Who did this to your face?'

'Official Wang, it's my fault... I was careless,' Xiao Nu said.

Wang Fu Mu didn't believe Xiao Nu. 'Do you know what happens if you disturb the peace in the palace by crying to amuse yourself?'

'I... I wouldn't dare... I...' Xiao Nu stuttered.

'Hurry and speak clearly!' Wang Fu Mu said.

Xiao Nu sobbed, Wang Fu Mu coaxed her and finally she confessed Pei Zhang threw hot tea on her face.

'I understand,' Wang Fu Mu said. 'Go find Gentleman Ting Zi. I'll send someone to him and he'll give you a remedy that won't leave scars.'

Xiao Nu was deeply grateful, she continuously bowed to Wang Fu Mu.

'In the future be more careful,' Wang Fu Mu said and left.

Wang Fu Mu smiled while walking toward the emperor's chamber. Wang Fu Mu survived in the palace for years and he knew small and big connections were both valuable. The emperor made it hard for Pei Zhang and Pei Jin to spy on each other. So any hole in Pei Zhang's defence would benefit Pei Jin. Wang Fu Mu anticipated Xiao Nu would be useful in the future.

North of the imperial city, Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning travelled in a horse carriage and they happily viewed the sights of warmer landscapes.

Pei Jin knew Yan Shi Ning hated the cold winter so he asked his father to let him take Yan Shi Ning to a villa north of the imperial city for her to bathe in hot springs and avoid the cold winter. His father consented and also gave Yan Shi Ning two of his father's most trusted imperial guards.

Pei Jin covered Yan Shi Ning's body with a thick fur cape and he fed her mandarin segments.

'Shi Ning, you only know how to eat and sleep,' Pei Jin teased. 'Shi Ning, you need to move a little.'

'Pei Jin, aren't you the one who wants me to act weak?' Yan Shi Ning asked. 'So of course I need to eat and sleep.'

‘If you didn’t act weak then you wouldn’t be allowed to go to the Feng Zhao villa,’ Pei Jin said. ‘Your father-in-law rarely allows anyone to visit the Feng Zhao villa. I’ve heard it was a beautiful place but I’ve never been there before. Your father-in-law is worried about your weak condition so of course we need to use this opportunity to visit the Feng Zhao villa.’

‘Pei Jin, you’re more of a schemer by the day,’ Yan Shi Ning said.

Pei Jin laughed like a fox. ‘What else can I do? I know you’re scared of being cold. When you were a little girl if it was a cold winter, you’ll stay in bed and didn’t want to go outside. So I’m scared you can’t endure the cold winter in the imperial city.’

Yan Shi Ning didn’t show Pei Jin that her heart was filled with sweetness. ‘Pei Jin, are you hiding something from me?’

‘Wife, everything your husband said was true,’ Pei Jin said.

Yan Shi Ning stared at Pei Jin’s eyes for a while and he confessed.

‘The truth is your father-in-law sent two of his imperial guards to follow us,’ Pei Jin said. ‘His purpose is to protect us and also spy on us. He’s scared I’ll secretly meet Huang Guo. That’s why he let us go to the Feng Zhao villa because he wants to separate me and Huang Guo. If we get to amuse ourselves sightseeing and also make him happy then of course I’ll grant his wish and keep my distance from Huang Guo.’

Pei Jin thought Yan Shi Ning wasn’t convinced he confessed everything. ‘Wife, I also want to go to the Feng Zhao villa to bathe together with you in the hot springs.’

Yan Shi Ning knew Pei Jin wanted to do it with her in the hot springs.

‘Pei Jin, wouldn’t us leaving the imperial city benefit seventh prince?’ Yan Shi Ning asked. ‘It’ll make it easier for him entice more court officials to his side.’

Pei Jin peeled another mandarin for Yan Shi Ning. 'Wife, you don't need to worry about seventh brother. Imperial father wants me to behave so I need to behave to let them slowly put their guards down. To me what's most important is my wife and child are safe. Consort Mu and seventh brother are too cruel. So for now we need to hide somewhere safe.'

'Are we truly not going to do anything?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

Yan Shi Ning was worried Pei Zhang's second wife would give birth to a son and the emperor would make Pei Zhang the crown prince and kill everyone at Pei Jin's manor.

'Shi Ning, do you think we're wearier of them or they're wearier of our child?' Pei Jin asked.

'Of course they're wearier,' Yan Shi Ning said.

'If they haven't made a move then we don't need to be impatient and make a move,' Pei Jin said. 'Consort Mu is a venomous snake hibernating in winter. We'll be prepared to strike when they make a move. Also, seventh brother's manor has always been stormy.'

'Pei Jin, what are you implying?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'Seventh brother doesn't care about beauty,' Pei Jin said. 'He only marries women from powerful families that are useful to him. Both his official wife and second wife are from powerful families. There's a saying that a mountain cave can't have two tigers unless one is a male and the other is a female. Seventh brother's manor has two tigresses. His official wife is petty and jealous. His second wife's heart isn't good either. His official wife and second wife have opposed each other since the start. Of course his official wife isn't going to let his pregnant second wife sit on her head. His official wife will do anything to protect her own child and position. His second wife isn't going to stand idle, of course she'll retaliate. Shi Ning, don't let their harmonious act fool you. Inside seventh brother's manor aren't beautiful sceneries, no one can predict what will happen inside his manor... that's why it's best to have only one wife otherwise there'll be no peace in the family.'

Chapter 64

‘Why does the emperor want to mislead outsiders to believe he’s indecisive between you and seventh prince?’ Yan Shi Ning asked.

‘Imperial father isn’t immortal,’ Pei Jin said.

‘What?’ Yan Shi Ning asked.

‘Imperial father loves to have everything within his control,’ Pei Jin said. ‘He was disappointed tenth brother didn’t want the throne and he’s still grieving for tenth brother. He hasn’t found tenth brother’s killer so he must be angry to death. He hates being forced to do something he doesn’t want to so he hasn’t declared who his heir is. Also, he wants to vent his anger on seventh brother by not feeding seventh brother’s arrogance. Now the two of them can be angry to death together.’

After a day of travelling the horse carriage finally stopped. Pei Jin helped Yan Shi Ning out of the horse carriage and they looked at the beautiful mountain landscape together.

Pei Jin leaned closer to Yan Shi Ning and whispered in her ear. ‘Inside is more enchanting.’

Yan Shi Ning thought Pei Jin was a greedy scoundrel.

Pei Jin led Yan Shi Ning and everyone else into the Feng Zhao villa and they ate a meal together.

‘Bei Dou, am I the most handsome and kindest man in the world?’ Pei Jin asked.

Bei Dou spat out tea and Xiao Tu passed him a handkerchief.

Bei Dou didn’t understand why Pei Jin suddenly asked a strange question.

‘Bathing together is good,’ Pei Jin said softly.

Bei Dou finally understood Pei Jin's question.

'Imperial father's guards are guarding outside,' Pei Jin said. 'They're not allowed to come inside. I dismissed all the villa's maids and servants. There's only our people left.'

Bei Dou looked in four directions and nodded his head.

'Bei Dou, under the sky am I the most handsome and kindest man?' Pei Jin asked.

'Um,' Bei Dou said reluctantly.

Bei Dou hated the cold winter. Xiao Tu didn't want to do it with him on cold nights... she wouldn't complain about the cold inside the hot springs.

After Pei Jin secretly bribed Bei Dou, Pei Jin held Yan Shi Ning's hand toward the hot springs but they were stopped by Xiao Zai.

'Ninth prince, under the sky you're the most handsome and kindest man!' Xiao Zai praised and tugged Xiao Hui's hand.

Earlier Xiao Zai was hunting wild rabbits with Xiao Hui in the mountains so Xiao Zai only heard part of Pei Jin and Bei Dou's conversation. But Xiao Zai judged by Bei Dou's red ears that he would be rewarded if he praised Pei Jin too.

Pei Jin saw Xiao Zai's bright smile and Xiao Hui's frown.

'Xiao Zai, do you want to bathe together too?' Pei Jin teased.

'Ninth prince even if it's too troublesome, you're still the most handsome and kindest man!' Xiao Zai said.

Pei Jin realised Xiao Zai thought he was speaking in codes.

'The two of you... want to do it together?' Pei Jin asked.

Xiao Zai thought Pei Jin agreed to award him. 'Yes, together!'

‘Who wants to do it with you?’ Xiao Hui asked. ‘Do you want to die? Ninth prince, is asking if I’ll be scrubbing your back!’

‘Your grandfather!’ Xiao Zai cursed. ‘Fat meat! If I was the one scrubbing your back then my two hands would be tired to death... don’t eat all my chicken feet, you wild chicken! How can you eat your brothers?’

Pei Jin dragged Yan Shi Ning to the springs while Xiao Zai and Xiao Hui were distracted.

The moment Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning entered the cave, he decided he was going to eat her three hundred times. The cold winter starved him for too many nights.

Unfortunately Bei Dou interrupted Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning before Pei Jin could undress Yan Shi Ning.

‘I forgot to tell you something,’ Bei Dou said.

Pei Jin didn’t like the bad news look in Bei Dou’s eyes.

‘It’s not safe for pregnant women to bathe in hot springs,’ Bei Dou said. ‘I’ll take Xiao Tu to the hot springs first.’

‘Bei Dou!’ Pei Jin cried out. ‘Come outside! I remember I need your help to do something important!’

Pei Jin believed sworn brothers should share blessings and sufferings together.

That winter was the coldest winter in the imperial city. Pei Zhang endured the cold and worked the whole winter while Pei Jin relaxed in the warm Feng Zhao villa with Yan Shi Ning. Pei Jin couldn’t bathe together with Yan Shi Ning but they listened to singers and musicians perform. When Yan Shi Ning was napping, Pei Jin went hunting for wild birds and rabbits. If he found anything rare, he would ask a messenger deliver it to his father... the messenger would return with news about what happened in the imperial city.

Huang Guo as Pei Jin expected had exploited the weakness of Pei Zhang's manor. Huang Guo sent his daughter-in-laws to visit Pei Zhang's official and second wife and 'accidentally' found out about their internal fights which was spread to the emperor's ears. Pei Zhang was busy assuring the emperor that Pei Zhang's manor was a harmonious place. Consort Mu summoned Pei Zhang's official wife and second wife to the palace to berate them.

Pei Jin was angry after he found out Pei Khan was hit. Apart from the spoiled Pei Wen Cai, no one would dare to hit Pei Khan. Pei Khan couldn't endure Pei Wen Cai anymore and pushed her to the ground. The emperor wasn't angry at Consort La but angry at Pei Zhang for not knowing how to discipline Pei Wen Cai.

The news that saddened Pei Jin the most was that the imperial physicians didn't expect Consort La to live past spring.

Chapter 65

The Feng Zhao villa was a tranquil place.

Yan Shi Ning's stomach was big and she was expected to give birth within two months.

While everyone from Pei Jin's manor were excited to meet their young master, in Pei Zhang's manor was only chaos.

Pei Zhang's second wife, Dian Thi was the one who was secretly anxious.

Dian Thi sat anxiously in her chamber and rubbed her round stomach, she was seven months pregnant.

Dian Thi's personal maid Xiao Hai entered her chamber.

'How is it?' Dian Thi asked.

Xiao Hai looked in four directions for spies and spoke softly. 'It's done.'

‘Did anyone see you?’ Dian Thi asked.

‘Mistress, don’t worry,’ Xiao Hai said. ‘I saw him swallow it myself.’

Dian Thi stared out the window. ‘Feng Lang, you can’t blame me. For our child... you should rest.’

Feng Lang was Pei Zhang’s guard. Dian Thi met Feng Lang after she married Pei Zhang, she thought Feng Lang was young and handsome. She would flirt with Feng Lang and over time Feng Lang fell deeply in love with her. But they didn’t commit adultery until seven months ago.

Dian Thi was young and beautiful so Pei Zhang doted on Dian Thi. Pei Zhang’s official wife Chu Thi was jealous of Dian Thi. After a few years, Dian Thi noticed Pei Zhang spent less nights in her chamber. Two autumns ago Dian Thi found out Chu Thi made Pei Zhang suspicious of Dian Thi.

‘Husband, little sister had been married into the imperial family for many years but she’s still not pregnant,’ Chu Thi said.

Dian Thi was furious Chu Thi brought concubines younger and more beautiful than Dian Thi into Pei Zhang’s chamber. Gradually Pei Zhang was colder toward Dian Thi and her temper grew hotter. Pei Zhang wanted an heir but Dian Thi wasn’t pregnant.

Dian Thi used wine to forget her troubles. One night when she was drunk she remembered Feng Lang and from that night they secretly slept together.

Dian Thi was pregnant after sleeping with Feng Lang a few nights. She wasn’t happy she was finally pregnant because she worried she would die a gruesome death. Before she could abort the child, Chu Thi found out she was pregnant. Dian Thi saw the joy on Pei Zhang’s face so she swallowed her anxiety and acted like she was happy to be pregnant.

Pei Zhang doted on Dian Thi again because she was pregnant. Dian Thi was happy to see Chu Thi’s grind teeth. But Dian Thi’s feelings toward

the child inside her was complex. She was scared the identity of the child's father would be exposed.

Dian Thi secretly met Feng Lang and coaxed him to keep their secret. Feng Lang loved her enough to promise her that he would take their secret to his coffin. Dian Thi was grateful toward him on their last night together and they promised each other they would be husband and wife in their next lifetime. After their last night together they acted like strangers.

Dian Thi's life as a pregnant woman apart from her anxiety was good. Pei Zhang doted on her and the emperor rewarded her with many valuable gifts.

Unfortunately after Dian Thi was seven months pregnant an incident happened. Pei Zhang's guards were drunk and they challenged each other who could climb into Feng Lang's chamber without being caught. A young guard found a woman's undergarments inside Feng Lang's chamber... it was Dian Thi's undergarments that Feng Lang kept as a love token.

While the guards were speculating who the owner of the undergarments was, Chu Thi walked past them and recognised the embroidery on the undergarments belonged to Dian Thi.

Chu Thi interrogated Feng Lang why he dared to keep Pei Zhang's second wife's undergarments in Feng Lang's chamber.

Feng Lang protected Dian Thi and lied that he stole Dian Thi's undergarments because he admired her.

Although Feng Lang didn't betray Dian Thi, she was even more anxious and discussed with Xiao Hai how to deal with the dilemma. So Dian Thi pretended to hang herself to prove her innocence.

Chu Thi thought perhaps her suspicions were wrong. Since Feng Lang admitted his crime and Dian Thi proved her innocence, Feng Lang was beaten as punishment.

Pei Zhang wanted to kill Feng Lang but the emperor criticized Pei Zhang that he didn't know how to punish others according to their crime. Even though Pei Zhang couldn't punish Feng Lang harshly, Pei Zhang had Chu Thi to punish Feng Lang for Pei Zhang.

Chu Thi purposely sent news to Dian Thi that Feng Lang was severely injured and Chu Thi was suspicious why Dian Thi acted strange to receive the news since Dian Thi said she had no relations with Feng Lang.

After Dian Thi heard the news she resented Feng Lang for not killing himself. So she sent Xiao Hai to remind him he promised to take their secret to his coffin.

While Xiao Hai reported to Dian Thi that Xiao Hai saw Feng Lang swallowed the poison, Pei Zhang and Chu Thi appeared in Feng Lang's chamber.

Chu Thi was happy to see Pei Zhang's rage after he found out Dian Thi committed adultery with another man.

'Seventh prince, earlier did you see and hear everything?' Chu Thi asked. 'Xiao Hai is Dian Thi's personal maid. Xiao Hai said to Feng Lang that her mistress remembered he promised to take their secret to his coffin...'

'Close your mouth!' Pei Zhang ordered.

Pei Zhang was deceived. He thought he finally had an heir but it was a bastard child!

'Someone go and tie up that woman scum!' Pei Zhang ordered.

Pei Zhang left the chamber and Chu Thi smiled at the imposter Feng Lang.

'Go and receive your reward,' Chu Thi said.

The imposter Feng Lang thanked Chu Thi and left the chamber.

Xiao Hai met the imposter Feng Lang. The real Feng Lang had bitten off his tongue to prove Dian Thi's innocence.

It was a pity Dian Thi wasn't sincerely grateful the real Feng Lang killed himself to protect Dian Thi and their child.

Chu Thi purposely imprisoned Feng Lang to see how Dian Thi would react. If Dian Thi was guilty then Dian Thi would react recklessly. Chu Thi thought it was laughable Dian Thi was fooled by a simple tactic.

In Dian Thi's chamber she was more anxious because she thought Feng Lang died too smoothly... her anxiety was right, she heard footsteps approached her chamber. She saw guards kicked her door open and her beautiful face whitened.

In the palace Consort Mu knocked over a teapot.

'Is that true?' Consort Mu asked.

'Dian Thi confessed,' one of Pei Zhang's personal guards said.

'Escort me to seventh prince's manor!' Consort Mu said.

Consort Mu lied to the emperor that Dian Thi was ill and the emperor consented.

Pei Zhang destroyed everything in the courtyard but no one conscious knew why except for Chu Thi.

After Consort Mu visited the manor, everyone else knew Pei Zhang wasn't angry over something minor.

Consort Mu frowned to see fear in everyone's eyes but she calmly walked toward Pei Zhang's chamber.

Inside Pei Zhang's chamber he held a leather whip and Dian Thi was bound and unconscious on the floor. It was the fresh blood on Dian Thi's body that startled Consort Mu.

'Xiao Zhang, do you want to beat her to death?' Consort Mu asked.

‘Beating her to death is too soft,’ Pei Zhang said.

‘Xiao Zhang!’ Consort Mu said. ‘Wake up! If you beat her to death, how are you going to explain her death to your imperial father?’

‘I only want to cut this scum into pieces!’ Pei Zhang said.

‘It’s useless to be angry,’ Consort Mu said. ‘How many outsiders know about this?’

‘Two,’ Pei Zhang said.

‘Is there a chance this secret will be exposed?’ Consort Mu asked.

‘No, they’re dead,’ Pei Zhang said.

‘Good, if that fox Huang Guo finds out... I don’t know what your imperial father would do,’ Consort Mu said.

‘How should I deal with this scum?’ Pei Zhang asked.

‘Of course the child can’t be spared,’ Consort Mu said. ‘But if this child dies, it’ll be a disadvantage for us while your ninth brother’s wife is pregnant.’

Consort Mu and Pei Zhang were in deep thought.

‘If the child looks like her then the child can live until you have an heir... but if the child looks like him...’ Consort Mu said.

‘What do we do?’ Pei Zhang asked.

‘If this child must die then your ninth brother’s child must die too!’ Consort Mu said.

Chapter 66

‘Mother, what’s your plan?’ Pei Zhang asked.

‘The cold winter is over and they’ll be returning to the imperial city,’ Consort Mu said. ‘There’ll be many opportunities like Consort La won’t live past spring and your imperial father’s birthday banquet.’

At the Feng Zhao villa Pei Jin, Yan Shi Ning and everyone else were amusing themselves.

Some sat in front of the door and relaxed and others were hunting, playing, eating or sleeping.

They only needed to think about what amusements they should plan each day. Their only regret was that they couldn’t stay at Feng Zhao villa forever.

On the twelfth day of the fourth month, sad news was delivered to the Feng Zhao villa, Consort La died.

‘Pei Jin, why did Consort La die this sudden...’ Yan Shi Ning asked in a sad tone.

Pei Jin hugged Yan Shi Ning and asked everyone to pack their belongings.

That day Pei Jin, Yan Shi Ning and everyone else travelled back to the imperial city.

Inside the horse carriage Yan Shi Ning rubbed her big stomach. ‘Pei Jin, Consort La was only older than me a few years...’

‘Each person has their own fate,’ Pei Jin said.

‘What about Pei Khan?’ Yan Shi Ning asked. ‘He’s only a little boy... who will protect him?’

Pei Jin thought Pei Khan’s situation was like his own childhood, he didn’t have anyone to protect him either.

‘Pei Jin...’ Yan Shi Ning said.

‘Um?’ Pei Jin asked.

‘Can we bring Pei Khan to our home and protect him?’ Yan Shi Ning asked.

‘I want to bring Pei Khan home too but right now our home won’t be safe for Pei Khan,’ Pei Jin said.

Yan Shi Ning understood as long as the emperor was alive, Pei Khan’s life in the palace would be pitiful but Pei Khan would stay alive.

‘Pei Khan is a pitiful little boy... he’s only five years old,’ Yan Shi Ning said.

‘Shi Ning, it’s good for Pei Khan to experience pain while he’s young... it’ll help him grow stronger and adapt to life in the palace,’ Pei Jin said. ‘If we want to protect Pei Khan then we need to grow stronger until no one can threaten us.’

Yan Shi Ning held her stomach protectively.

‘Winter hibernation is over,’ Pei Jin said.

Pei Jin hugged Yan Shi Ning and their child.

Later that day a simple funeral was held for Consort La at the palace. Yan Shi Ning was pregnant and wasn’t allowed to attend the funeral. She could only watch at a far distance. Pei Khan was too little so she couldn’t see him and had to wait for Pei Jin to ask about Pei Khan.

‘Pei Khan silently cried,’ Pei Jin said. ‘I don’t know if Consort La’s death has hurt him mentally but now he can’t say even say two words.’

‘Pei Jin, go console Pei Khan,’ Yan Shi Ning said.

‘I want to but he’s surrounded by palace maids and eunuchs,’ Pei Jin said. ‘I won’t have an opportunity to talk privately with him.’

Yan Shi Ning felt helpless.

Pei Jin held Yan Shi Ning’s hand. ‘In another three days I’ll take you to visit Pei Khan.’

Yan Shi Ning worried about Pei Khan. She knew the emperor didn't favour Consort La because the emperor was ashamed of Pei Khan since he couldn't speak. So the people in the palace wouldn't care about Pei Khan.

'Wife, is the little fox inside your stomach troubling you again?' Pei Jin asked.

'What little fox?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

Pei Jin was happy to see Yan Shi Ning smile. 'Wife, after little fox is born let's conceive a little lion... we can't... let's wait another two years before we conceive a little lion.'

Yan Shi Ning was speechless. She understood why Pei Jin didn't want their child to have a sibling too soon. Suddenly she heard a noise. 'Pei Jin, there's someone else here.'

Pei Jin looked at a small hidden spot. 'Thirteenth brother?'

Pei Khan looked around the room. He didn't see anyone else and crawled out of his hiding spot.

'Thirteen brother, why are you here?' Yan Shi Ning asked. 'Where are your palace maids and eunuchs?'

Pei Khan's teary eyes stared at Yan Shi Ning's big stomach, it made Yan Shi Ning's heart ached.

Pei Jin knelt in front of Pei Khan. 'Thirteenth brother, did you hide here by yourself?'

Pei Khan pointed a finger at Pei Jin.

'Thirteenth brother, were you waiting for me?' Pei Jin asked.

Pei Khan nodded his head.

'Thirteenth brother, what did you wanted to tell me?' Pei Jin asked.

Pei Khan pulled out a hairpin and gave it to Yan Shi Ning, it was the butterfly hairpin she didn't accept from Consort La.

Chapter 67

Pei Khan held the hairpin.

Pei Khan listened to his mother's advice before she died.

'Xiao Khan, after I die you need to find ninth brother and ninth sister,' Consort Mu said. 'If they accept this hairpin then you need to be good and listen to them. If they don't accept it... you need to be careful in the palace. You can't trust anyone. You have to use a silver needle to test all your food and drinks before you eat and drink... Xiao Khan, I can't take care of you anymore.'

Pei Khan was scared if he blinked he would have no one left. His mother was gone and if Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning didn't accept his mother's hairpin then he would lose everything.

Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning's hearts were teared, Consort La used her life to protect Pei Khan and find a good place for Pei Khan before she died.

Consort La gambled everything on Pei Jin's brotherly love toward Pei Khan and Yan Shi Ning's maternal traits. She believed they wouldn't refuse a mother's last request.

Yan Shi Ning wiped her tears. 'Thirteenth brother, this is a beautiful hairpin. Hurry and put it on my head.'

Pei Khan's eyes shone and he listened to Yan Shi Ning.

Pei Khan rubbed Yan Shi Ning's big stomach. 'Little brother.'

'Thirteenth brother, this is your nephew,' Yan Shi Ning said.

Pei Khan looked at Pei Jin for help.

‘Thirteenth brother, are you saying the child is a boy?’ Pei Jin asked.

Pei Khan nodded his head.

‘Thirteenth brother, how do you know the child is a boy?’ Yan Shi Ning asked.

Pei Khan pouted his lips. He hated girls like Pei Wen Cai.

Pei Jin led Yan Shi Ning and Pei Khan to the emperor’s chamber.

Consort Mu, Pei Zhang and Chu Thi were waiting for their arrival. Yan Shi Ning saw the way they looked at her big stomach with bad intentions and she held onto her big stomach.

The emperor’s hair had greyed. Although he didn’t love Consort La, she still faithfully followed him for years. He looked at Yan Shi Ning’s big stomach and he thought Consort La died too young.

‘Seventh son, next time bring your second wife with you to visit me,’ the emperor said.

The emperor only wanted to see all his daughter-in-laws at the same time. But Chu Thi misunderstood the emperor planned to elevate the scum’s position. Chu Thi regretted Dian Thi’s body hadn’t recovered fast enough otherwise Consort Mu’s plan would have worked that day. Chu Thi fisted her hands, she couldn’t wait for the emperor’s birthday banquet to see Dian Thi die a gruesome death.

‘Imperial father, I want to make a request,’ Pei Jin said.

‘What is it?’ the emperor asked.

‘Imperial father, thirteenth brother is grieving,’ Pei Jin said. ‘I want to bring thirteenth brother to my manor for a few days to console him.’

Consort Mu and Pei Zhang didn’t approve. They were worried Pei Jin wanted the world to see how much brotherly love Pei Jin had toward his brothers. Also, they didn’t want Pei Jin and Pei Khan’s bond to grow deeper.

‘Ninth brother is right,’ Pei Zhang said. ‘But perhaps it’s better if I bring thirteenth brother to my manor. He’ll have Wen Cai to play with. Wen Cai misses thirteenth brother and there are many delicious food too.’

Pei Khan shook his head. In the past Pei Wen Cai tricked him with delicious food and hit him too often. He wasn’t fooled by Pei Zhang’s words.

‘Thirteenth son, you don’t want to go with your seventh brother?’ the emperor asked.

Pei Khan nodded his head.

‘Why?’ the emperor asked.

‘Hit!’ Pei Khan said.

The emperor remembered how Pei Wen Cai hit Pei Khan and he understood. He was displeased to have such a bad granddaughter.

‘Thirteenth son, do you want to go with your ninth brother?’

Pei Khan heard his father’s strange tone so he waited a while before he nodded his head reluctantly.

The emperor was satisfied Pei Khan didn’t agree immediately otherwise it meant Pei Khan was cooperating with Pei Jin. ‘Ninth son, take your thirteenth brother to your manor for a few days.’

The emperor agreed because he knew Pei Jin would take care of Pei Khan but most importantly he could use Pei Khan to spy on Pei Jin.

Yan Shi Ning was overjoyed the emperor consented to let Pei Khan stay with her and Pei Jin. While Consort Mu and Pei Zhang weren’t pleased.

That evening Yan Shi Ning prepared a chamber for Pei Khan and stayed with him until he fell asleep.

Yan Shi Ning returned to her chamber and laid next to Pei Jin on the bed.

‘Pei Jin, are you upset with me for accepting Consort La’s request before discussing it with you?’ Yan Shi Ning asked. ‘But I didn’t want us to leave Pei Khan in the palace.’

‘Shi Ning, Pei Khan staying with us too soon will be a little more dangerous for us and Pei Khan,’ Pei Jin said. ‘But don’t worry, I’ll find a way to protect all of us. Besides, you made your decision in front of me.’

Yan Shi Ning was relieved Pei Jin wasn’t upset with her decision.

‘I want you and our child to be safe,’ Pei Jin said. ‘I want Pei Khan to be safe too. In the future all of us need to be more cautious.’

Pei Jin’s intuition warned him that he couldn’t hide his real strengths for much longer.

Although Pei Jin and the emperor agreed Pei Khan could stay for a few days with Pei Jin, their unspoken agreement implied Pei Khan could stay with Pei Jin for a long period.

Several days past, Pei Khan adapted well to life at Pei Jin’s manor. The guards, maids and servants looked after Pei Khan well and played with him. It eased a little of Pei Khan’s pain of losing his mother.

Pei Zhang was frustrated Pei Jin surrounded Pei Jin’s manor with more guards and made it harder for Pei Zhang to spy on Pei Jin.

Pei Zhang also discovered Pei Jin’s guards looked ordinary but the guards were strong enough to kill intruders without a trace and they fiercely protected everyone in Pei Jin’s manor. Because one of Pei Zhang’s guards hid at a shop nearby Pei Jin’s manor and at night the guard was attacked by a silent sword. If the guard didn’t play dead and crawled back to Pei Zhang’s manor to show the deep chest wound from one strike then Pei Zhang wouldn’t have known how strong Pei Jin’s guards were.

Pei Zhang wondered how Pei Jin could afford to raise strong guards. Pei Zhang slitted his eyes, he was anticipating their father’s birthday banquet in three days... it would be a memorable amusing day.

Chapter 68

The emperor's birthday banquet was held at the end of May.

Early that morning Yan Shi Ning felt the day was going to be a dangerous day.

'Pei Jin, I'm scared something bad will happen,' Yan Shi Ning said.

'Don't worry, we're prepared,' Pei Jin said. 'In the palace I can't be beside you the whole visit but Xiao Tu will be there. Xiao Tu is Bei Dou's wife, he taught her well. She'll be able to detect any poisonous fragrances, food and drinks. He taught her some Kung Fu skills too.'

Pei Jin failed to reassure himself and Yan Shi Ning. He couldn't get rid of the invisible bad omen.

Recently Pei Jin and his guards protected Yan Shi Ning, their child and Pei Khan well against Pei Zhang's guards. Pei Jin knew that his father's birthday banquet was the last opportunity for Pei Zhang to target Pei Jin's family.

Pei Jin didn't know what Pei Zhang and Consort Mu's plan of attack was and it worried Pei Jin.

In Bei Dou's chamber, he watched Xiao Tu pack medicine and tools. He was also worried about the emperor's birthday banquet.

'Be careful in the palace,' Bei Dou warned.

'Yes, can I bring a dagger?' Xiao Tu asked.

Bei Dou silently looked at the dagger Xiao Tu held.

'I'm teasing you,' Xiao Tu said. 'I packed a lot of medicine, nutritious food and herbal drinks for ninth prince's wife.'

In the courtyard Xiao Zai was coaxing Pei Khan to speak. After Bei Dou examined Pei Khan, Bei Dou reassured everyone Pei Khan was intelligent and capable of speaking. It was Pei Khan's environment in the past that traumatized Pei Khan.

For several days Xiao Zai failed to trick Pei Khan to speak even though Pei Khan was happy living at the manor.

'Thirteenth prince, you can say anything good or bad,' Xiao Zai begged on his knees. 'What about two words? I made a bet with Xiao Hui. I said you will say two words by this morning.'

Pei Khan pitied Xiao Zai and patted Xiao Zai's head.

'Be good,' Pei Khan said.

Pei Khan saw Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning come out of their chamber and he ran to them.

Xiao Zai stood and touched his head. 'Be good? Why does thirteenth prince sound like my grandfather?'

Xiao Hui patted Xiao Zai's head.

'Be good,' Xiao Hui said and ran away.

'Your grandfather!' Xiao Zai cursed and chased Xiao Hui.

Pei Jin escorted his family and his guards to the palace.

At the palace Pei Jin's horse carriage arrived at the same time as Pei Zhang's horse carriage.

Pei Jin waited for Pei Zhang's group to enter the palace first.

'Pei Jin, did you notice there is something strange about Dian Thi?' Yan Shi Ning asked softly.

Pei Jin looked at Dian Thi in the distance. Although Dian Thi wore makeup and a beautiful dress, it couldn't hide her withered aura like someone attending a funeral.

Inside Consort Mu's chamber, she wore a more elaborate dress than usual. She wasn't pleased to see Chu Thi but she hated seeing Dian Thi.

'Don't act like a corpse... if you exposed anything... you know what will happen to you,' Consort Mu threatened Dian Thi.

'Yes aunt,' Dian Thi said.

'I considered your mother, my cousin who is like a sister to me so I spared your life this time,' Consort Mu said. 'But don't you dare to act shameless and ruin my plan.'

'But... I've carried the child for nine months,' Dian Thi said.

'Don't worry, I'll spare your life,' Consort Mu said.

Dian Thi clasped her trembling hands helplessly.

Consort Mu took off her bracelet and gave it Dian Thi to wear. Consort Mu wasn't pleased to see fresh bruises on Dian Thi's wrist and she looked disapprovingly at her son.

Pei Zhang resented he couldn't kill the scum. Each time he saw her, he could only hit her. He was careful not to leave visible bruises on her but he forgot to check her wrists.

'It's time to go to the banquet hall,' Consort Mu said.

Consort Mu's family left the chamber while Xiao Nu hid behind a window. Xiao Nu found the bracelet a palace maid ordered her to find. Xiao Nu also found out Consort Mu's secret.

The emperor's birthday banquet was held in the imperial banquet hall. There were dancers, singers, musicians and actors who performed at the banquet. The guests ate food and drank wine.

Pei Jin was too anxious to appreciate the performers' skills. At his father's birthday banquet the men and women sat at different banquet tables. Pei Jin couldn't sit next to Yan Shi Ning, he could only look at her. He noticed Consort Mu and Pei Zhang were watching Yan Shi Ning too closely.

Yan Shi Ning didn't dare touch the delicious food and wine in front of her. She was worried Consort Mu would dare to poison the food and wine to kill her and her son.

Yan Shi Ning was also weary of the venomous Chu Thi who sat next to her, Chu Thi was smiling at her but she felt Chu Thi was displaying fangs.

Yan Shi Ning calmly picked up a cup of wine and pretended to sip the wine while spilling it into her sleeve.

'Seventh sister, forgive me,' Yan Shi Ning said. 'I need to go relieve myself.'

Xiao Tu escorted Yan Shi Ning to a chamber the emperor reserved for his daughter-in-laws in the palace.

'Mistress, calm down,' Xiao Tu advised.

Yan Shi Ning watched Xiao Tu help her wipe her dress too calmly.

'Little sister Xiao Tu, wait until you're pregnant then you'll understand how I'm feeling,' Yan Shi Ning said.

Xiao Tu thought Yan Shi Ning's words were reasonable and nodded her head.

Yan Shi Ning sat on a chair near a window. 'I want to stay here and rest. I don't want to go back to the banquet hall.'

Xiao Tu quietly opened a small chest she packed. She used a silver needle to check if the food and drinks were safe. Then she passed the small chest to Yan Shi Ning.

Yan Shi Ning's eyes brightened to see the familiar nutritious food and drinks.

'Ninth prince said his wife wouldn't dare eat the food at the palace so I secretly brought food into the palace,' Xiao Tu said.

Yan Shi Ning smiled, she thought Pei Jin was more considerate by the day.

Yan Shi Ning and Xiao Tu happily ate and drank together but Dian Thi entered the chamber.

'What are you two doing?' Dian Thi asked.

Yan Shi Ning raised her head and saw a maid help Dian Thi walk.

Dian Thi was nine months pregnant and had trouble walking. The maid helped Dian Thi sit next to Yan Shi Ning.

Dian Thi looked at the small chest of food and drinks and smiled. 'Little sister, does your body ache when you stand or sit still for too long?'

'Yes,' Yan Shi Ning said politely. 'Big sister, your complexion looks pale. Do you want to call an imperial physician?'

'It's alright, perhaps it's because I'll be giving birth soon,' Dian Thi said.

Dian Thi turned to face the maid. 'Go and bring me lavender oil. I feel a little faint.'

Yan Shi Ning was suspicious of the gleam in Dian Thi's eyes. 'Big sister, I rested enough. I'll go back to the banquet hall first.'

'Wait,' Dian Thi said. 'Little sister can you help me pour a cup of tea. I'm thirsty after eating salty food.'

Yan Shi Ning reluctantly asked Xiao Tu to pour a cup of tea.

Dian Thi accepted the cup of tea, lowered her head and blew.

Yan Shi Ning was startled to see Dian Thi swirl the tea with a fingernail. Yan Shi Ning remembered she and Pei Jin used to same tactic to deal with Su Yue.

Dian Thi spat blood on her dress.

‘Someone! Help!’ Dian Thi screamed. ‘What did you put in the tea?’

The maid rushed into the chamber and the maid screamed too.

Yan Shi Ning’s back turned cold. Consort Mu didn’t want to poison her... Consort Mu wanted to frame her.

Chapter 69

The palace maids and eunuchs ran in different directions.

Some ran to the emperor, others to Pei Zhang, Pei Jin and Wang Fu Mu.

In the chamber, Dian Thi collapsed on the floor and was bleeding continuously. Tears fell down her pale face and her stomach ached unbearably. Even in her pain she didn’t forget to bite the powdered fingernail and swallow it.

Yan Shi Ning was too shocked to move. After she saw Consort Mu and Chu Thi approached the chamber too quickly, she regained her composure.

Yan Shi Ning didn’t know why Dian Thi cooperated with Consort Mu and Chu Thi to kill Dian Thi’s child and frame her. But she knew the consequences, the emperor wouldn’t spare Pei Jin and everyone at his manor for conspiring to kill the emperor’s grandchild.

‘Mistress, inside the tea are powder used to induce labour,’ Xiao Tu said.

Yan Shi Ning didn’t have any other options, she sipped the tea.

‘Mistress!’ Xiao Tu said.

‘Don’t worry, I only drank a sip,’ Yan Shi Ning said. ‘Little sister Xiao Tu, you need to be my midwife.’

‘Midwife?’ Xiao Tu asked.

Yan Shi Ning clutched her stomach, the powder was too concentrated.

‘My child is more than eight months,’ Yan Shi Ning said. ‘It’s possible. I’m begging little sister Xiao Tu!’

Yan Shi Ning laid on the floor. She felt her stomach contract and cried.

Xiao Tu thought about what happened and understood Yan Shi Ning’s logic. Yan Shi Ning wanted to save everyone at Pei Jin’s manor by drinking the dissolved power and giving birth prematurely.

Xiao Tu quickly helped Yan Shi Ning sit on the floor, pulled out a hairpin, pricked a finger and wiped the blood on Yan Shi Ning’s dress.

‘Ninth prince’s wife is bleeding!’ Xiao Tu screamed.

Xiao Tu’s fingers pressed on some of Yan Shi Ning’s vital acupuncture points and inserted a pill into Yan Shi Ning’s mouth.

Everyone rushed to the chamber and saw Dian Thi and Yan Shi Ning were bleeding on the floor.

Consort Mu and Chu Thi were startled Yan Shi Ning was giving birth too.

‘Ninth prince’s wife is in labour!’ Xiao Tu screamed.

A long time later Xiao Tu wiped Yan Shi Ning’s sweaty forehead.

‘Mistress, you need to push harder,’ Xiao Tu said.

‘Ah... ninth prince’s wife is bleeding!’ the palace maids cried out at the same time.

‘Get out of here!’ Xiao Tu ordered the troublesome palace maids.

Xiao Tu looked calmly at the panicked and tired Yan Shi Ning. 'Mistress, it's alright. Mistress, you need to push harder.'

Yan Shi Ning bit down on the cloth and pushed hard. She didn't know her fingernails were piercing her palms because the labour pain overwhelmed her senses.

'Son... you need to endure and survive,' Yan Shi Ning murmured.

Outside the chamber Pei Jin saw a maid carry another bowl of blood water.

'What's happening inside?' Pei Jin asked. 'How is my wife?'

The maid shivered to see the usual gentle ninth prince glare deadly at her. 'Ninth prince... I don't know.'

Pei Jin was angry and anxious. His wife and child were healthy. There was no reason for Yan Shi Ning to give birth prematurely unless something happened while she wasn't inside the banquet hall.

Dian Thi and Yan Shi Ning were in labour in chambers next to each other. Dian Thi gave birth to a stillborn child while Yan Shi Ning gave birth to a healthy child.

Dian Thi looked at her dead son's purple face and sobbed loudly.

Outside the chamber the emperor heard Dian Thi's sob.

'What happened?' the emperor asked Dian Thi's midwife coldly. 'How is my grandchild?'

The midwife knelt in front of the emperor and cried for mercy. 'Your majesty, seventh prince's second wife's child died.'

'Died?' the emperor asked.

The emperor didn't believe what he heard. How was it possible for a woman who had a smooth pregnancy for nine months suddenly lose a child?

Pei Zhang acted shock and slumped on the ground and Consort Mu cried hysterically.

‘My grandchild was healthy,’ Consort Mu said. ‘Why did I lose my grandchild?’

Suddenly a child’s loud cry was heard and Pei Jin stood upright.

Another midwife carried a healthy child outside Yan Shi Ning’s chamber.

‘Congratulations your majesty,’ the midwife said. ‘Congratulations ninth prince, your wife gave birth to a prince.’

Pei Jin didn’t care if his child was a boy or a girl. ‘How is my wife?’

‘Ninth prince, your wife lost a lot of blood,’ the midwife said. ‘Your wife is in a weak condition.’

Pei Jin rushed into the chamber and parted the beaded curtains. Yan Shi Ning was lying on the bed, her whole body was sweaty and her hair was messy.

Yan Shi Ning cried happy tears. ‘Pei Jin...’

Pei Jin held Yan Shi Ning and cried. ‘Shi Ning...’

‘Yan Shi Ning!’ Dian Thi cried out from the neighbouring chamber. ‘I want to kill you! Give back my son!’

Yan Shi Ning gripped Pei Jin’s hand. ‘This is their scheme. Be careful.’

The emperor was sad to hear a grandson died but he was also happy to hear his other grandson was alive.

‘What happened?’ the emperor asked Dian Thi’s maid coldly.

The maid knelt in front of the emperor and cried. ‘Your majesty, I don’t know. I left to get lavender oil for mistress and after I returned I saw

mistress lying on the floor and bleeding. I... I heard it was ninth prince's wife who poisoned the tea.'

'What poison?' the emperor asked and signalled an imperial guard to investigate.

A while later the imperial guard reported to the emperor. 'In ninth prince's wife and seventh prince's second wife's tea are powder to induce labour.'

'Who dared to do this?' the emperor asked. 'Find the culprit! Who were here when it happened? Who poured the tea?'

The palace maids and the eunuchs knelt and cried. 'Your majesty, we were framed.'

'Your majesty, the powder was only in their two cups of tea... it's too coincidental... someone must have contaminated their tea in front of them,' the imperial guard said.

Dian Thi and Yan Shi Ning were harmed so Xiao Tu was the biggest suspect.

Yan Shi Ning heard the emperor was interrogating Xiao Tu. She was weak but used her little strength to walk outside and kneel in front of the emperor.

'Imperial father, Xiao Tu is like a little sister to me,' Yan Shi Ning said. 'Xiao Tu risked her life to help me give birth. If she wanted to harm me, she could have easily killed me and my son.'

Pei Jin's heart ached to see Yan Shi Ning kneel too soon after giving birth, he could only kneel next to her.

The emperor believed Yan Shi Ning, he didn't think the culprit was Xiao Tu.

'If it isn't her then who else?' Consort Mu asked. 'There were only three of them inside the chamber!'

‘Why did you kill my son?’ Pei Zhang asked. He knelt in front of his father and cried. ‘Imperial father, you need to give my son justice.’

Chapter 70

‘Yan Shi Ning, why did you kill my son?’ Pei Zhang asked.

Yan Shi Ning was prepared for Pei Zhang’s accusation. She cried and hit her forehead on the ground.

‘Imperial father, it’s true I asked Xiao Tu to pour the tea for big sister Dian Thi,’ Yan Shi Ning said. ‘But I didn’t know what was inside the tea. I also drank the tea and was harmed too... my son could have died...’

Yan Shi Ning sobbed pitifully.

‘Who can be certain you didn’t risk your son’s life to kill my son?’ Pei Zhang asked. ‘Even though you drank the tea, you and your son are safe. What about my son? Your venomous snake heart schemed this!’

Yan Shi Ning heard Pei Zhang spit blood lies and threw dirty water over her body.

‘Seventh brother, what are you saying?’ Yan Shi Ning asked. ‘Are you saying because I want to kill your second wife’s child that I would risk harming my own child?’

‘To succeed you would willingly do anything!’ Pei Zhang said.

‘If what seventh brother saying is true then wouldn’t it also be true seventh brother would be willing to kill your son to frame me?’ Yan Shi Ning asked.

Pei Zhang was choked by Yan Shi Ning’s sharp words. ‘Why would I ask my second wife to kill our son to frame you?’

Yan Shi Ning laughed coldly. 'Seventh brother can suspect that I have a venomous snake heart and willing to sacrifice my son to succeed. Then why can't I suspect your second wife?'

'Everyone talk less,' Consort Mu said. 'What scheme? What frame? Take back your words!'

'Mother, you're also a mother,' Yan Shi Ning said. 'You understand the importance of flesh and blood. As long as a conscience exists, a mother would never risk their own child's life. I didn't commit the crime and I believe big sister Dian Thi didn't commit the crime either. Although we don't know who the culprit is but I didn't accuse big sister Dian Thi. So why is seventh brother certain that I'm the culprit?'

Yan Shi Ning could only deflect suspicion on Pei Zhang because Dian Thi swallowed the evidence.

'I can also empathise with seventh brother's state of mind,' Yan Shi Ning said. 'If I lost my son I believe I would act more irrational than seventh brother and his second wife. But I don't want dirty water to be poured over my body.'

Yan Shi Ning's breaths were shallow and her body swayed.

Pei Jin caught Yan Shi Ning before she fell on the ground.

'Imperial father, you know clearly what kind of person I am,' Yan Shi Ning said. 'Imperial father, everything I said earlier was true-'

Yan Shi Ning fainted.

'Shi Ning!' Pei Jin cried out.

'Imperial father, even if she isn't the culprit,' Pei Zhang said. 'But they drank from the same cup. Why is it the person who drank the tea first is affected more than the second person who drank the tea?'

'Your majesty, it's because my mistress' body is healthy but seventh prince's second wife's body is weak,' Xiao Tu said.

The emperor's imperial guards reported that Yan Shi Ning was healthy and active at the Feng Zhao villa while Dian Thi was mostly bedridden after being seven months pregnant. So the emperor didn't believe Yan Shi Ning was the culprit. But... he looked at Pei Jin asking the imperial physicians to save Yan Shi Ning then he looked at Pei Zhang's tears and heard Dian Thi's sob... it conflicted his heart.

'Ninth son, your wife is weak,' the emperor said. 'Your wife and son should stay in the palace until they recover.'

Pei Jin's back stiffened. His father wanted to hold his wife and son captive in the palace. It meant his father suspected him.

The emperor sent Yan Shi Ning and his grandson to the chamber with a spacious nursery and a beautiful courtyard.

Pei Jin changed Yan Shi Ning's clothes and laid her on the bed.

Yan Shi Ning secretly opened her eyes and saw Pei Jin guarding her. She smiled and her stomach hurt.

'Shi Ning, are you in pain?' Pei Jin asked.

'It hurts,' Yan Shi Ning said.

'You know how to feel pain?' Pei Jin asked.

'What?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

Pei Jin wanted to hit Yan Shi Ning's bottom. But he only gently bit her finger. 'When you're home I'll punish you.'

Yan Shi Ning looked pitifully at Pei Jin.

'Shi Ning, you and our son needs to stay in the palace,' Pei Jin said.

Yan Shi Ning widened her eyes.

Pei Jin kissed Yan Shi Ning's forehead. 'Shi Ning, don't worry. I'll escort you and our son home soon.'

Yan Shi Ning understood the emperor was suspicious of her and Pei Jin.

‘Shi Ning, you made the right decision,’ Pei Jin praised.

‘I fear it’ll be hard for me to see you in the palace for several days.’

‘I’ll take good care of our son,’ Yan Shi Ning said.

‘I want you to take good care of yourself first,’ Pei Jin said.

‘What?’ Yan Shi Ning asked.

‘I can’t lose you,’ Pei Jin said. ‘If we lose our child later we can have another child.’

‘I’ll take good care of myself,’ Yan Shi Ning said. ‘I want to tell you a secret.’

‘Um?’ Pei Jin asked.

‘Earlier I only pretended to faint,’ Yan Shi Ning said.

Pei Jin was speechless. He realised why a healthy Yan Shi Ning would suddenly turn weak.

‘I needed to faint to be more convincing,’ Yan Shi Ning said.

‘Shi Ning, then why didn’t you wake up until now?’ Pei Jin asked.

‘While you were holding me,’ Yan Shi Ning said. ‘I felt sleepy and slept.’

Pei Jin didn’t know what to say.

Later Pei Jin returned to the manor. After Pei Jin recounted what happened in the palace to everyone, everyone were both happy and sad.

They were happy Yan Shi Ning gave birth to their young master but they were sad Yan Shi Ning, Xiao Tu and their young master were held captive in the palace.

Bei Dou was the least happy. Pei Jin asked to borrow Xiao Tu for one day, but Xiao Tu ended up implicated in a calamity.

‘Pei Jin, you married a good woman,’ Bei Dou said. ‘If she didn’t react fast then we could have all died.’

Bei Dou thought Yan Shi Ning was suited to Pei Jin and his Xiao Tu was the best woman in his eyes. It was only recently he instructed Xiao Tu how to help a female cook give birth but Xiao Tu was a fast learner and was able to help Yan Shi Ning give birth on her own.

‘What’s your next step?’ Bei Dou asked.

‘First I need to find out why Pei Zhang needed to kill his own son,’ Pei Jin said.

Bei Dou nodded his head. ‘They wouldn’t gain anything to kill their own son.’

‘Luckily Shi Ning ruined their scheme otherwise none of us would be alive,’ Pei Jin said. ‘Imperial father is only holding Shi Ning and our son captive to warn me to behave. Although seventh brother won this battle even a vicious tiger wouldn’t eat its own child. Especially if the child is a boy and would earn imperial father’s favor. I don’t believe seventh brother would act this irrationally.’

‘Are you saying there’s something suspicious about the birth of Dian Thi’s son?’ Bei Dou asked.

Pei Jin nodded his head.

‘That’s possible,’ Bei Dou said. ‘I’ll send someone to seventh prince’s manor to investigate.’

‘I want my wife and your wife to come home soon,’ Pei Jin said. ‘Otherwise you’ll be suffering with me.’

‘Two people?’ Bei Dou asked. ‘It’s three people.’

‘Three... I forgot about my son,’ Pei Jin said.

Chapter 71

Yan Shi Ning recovered from giving birth in the palace.

The emperor sent his trusted eunuchs and palace maids to deliver nutritious food and drinks to nourish Yan Shi Ning while she was recovering and breastfeeding his first grandson.

A month past, Yan Shi Ning walked comfortably and her son was chubby and loved to cry.

‘Heavens!’ Yan Shi Ning cursed. ‘Why does the little MF love to cry? Wasn’t he napping?’

Yan Shi Ning’s son loved to cry in the morning, afternoon, evening and before napping. Sometimes he even cried to amuse himself. Other children would cry a little then sleep. But the little MF cries until someone carried him. Of course the MF Pei Jin would have a little MF son.

A month ago Yan Shi Ning was fearful each time her son cried because she was scared an intruder came to harm him. But after a month she found out her son loved to cry so she was used to his crying.

Yan Shi Ning didn’t want to spoil her son by carrying him every time he cried.

But Pei Khan’s heart couldn’t bear to hear his nephew cry.

The emperor forbid anyone disturbing Yan Shi Ning, Pei Khan and his grandson to protect them.

So Pei Khan loved to guard his nephew day and night and take care of his nephew.

Pei Khan ran to Yan Shi Ning’s bed. ‘Cry, cry.’

‘Thirteenth brother, ignore him,’ Yan Shi Ning said. ‘He only knows how to cry day and night.’

Pei Khan thought Yan Shi Ning was serious and pitied his nephew.

Pei Khan ran back to his nephew’s cot. He remembered how his mother used to coax him to sleep and gently rubbed his nephew’s soft head. ‘Nephew be good, don’t cry. Rub, rub.’

Pei Khan’s nephew stopped crying. ‘If nephew is good, I’ll let you eat sweets after you grow big. Now you don’t have any teeth to chew sweets.’

Perhaps Pei Khan’s warm hand, gentle words and promise to give his nephew sweets in the future helped his nephew sleep.

Suddenly Pei Khan felt someone entered the nursery, he turned around and quickly bowed to his father. ‘Imperial father.’

The emperor came to check if Yan Shi Ning was doing anything suspicious. After he was satisfied Yan Shi Ning was only learning to make nutritious herbal drinks with Xiao Tu, he asked Yan Shi Ning to escort him to see his grandson. But he didn’t expect his weak little thirteenth son knew how to speak fluently. It made him happy enough to fly into the sky.

Yan Shi Ning was overjoyed and knelt in front of Pei Khan. ‘Thirteenth brother, you know how to speak.’

Pei Khan nodded his head.

‘Thirteenth son, you don’t need to nod,’ the emperor said. ‘You can speak like earlier.’

‘Nephew stopped crying,’ Pei Khan said.

‘Thirteenth son, who taught you to speak?’ the emperor asked.

‘Ninth brother and ninth sister taught me,’ Pei Khan said.

The emperor's heart softened a little toward Yan Shi Ning because she helped Pei Khan learn to speak.

'Ninth daughter, is it comfortable living here?' the emperor asked.

'Imperial father, everything here is good, except...' Yan Shi Ning said.

'Except?' the emperor asked.

The emperor understood Yan Shi Ning's silence meant she missed Pei Jin.

Yan Shi Ning didn't want to talk to the troublesome emperor. She overheard the eunuchs and palace maids gossip and found out the emperor sent Pei Jin to Xuan Qing to perform duties while she was held captive in the palace for more than a month.

Yan Shi Ning was also suspicious why the emperor visited her for the first time since she was held captive.

'Tomorrow someone will escort you and your son home,' the emperor said.

Yan Shi Ning thought perhaps Pei Jin completed all his duties.

'Thirteenth son, it's time you learn how to read,' the emperor said.

Pei Khan was sad he wasn't allowed to return home with Yan Shi Ning and his nephew.

Perhaps Pei Khan's nephew knew he was feeling sad so his nephew cried loudly.

Yan Shi Ning couldn't let her son cry while the emperor was standing next to the cot. She picked up her son and found out her son had soiled his pants.

Yan Shi Ning bowed to the emperor and carried her son to the bed. She cleaned his body and changed his clothes.

Yan Shi Ning turned around to ask Xiao Tu to pass a fan but she didn't expect the emperor was standing nearby. She thought the emperor had left.

Yan Shi Ning assessed the emperor. He was looking at her son like he was curious and wanted to carry her son.

Yan Shi Ning smiled, she remembered a recent dream... she gave birth to a chubby child and the emperor wanted to carry her child but she carried her child far away from him.

In that moment she wanted to hide her son from the emperor. 'Imperial father, who do you think he looks like?'

The emperor slowly accepted his grandson and carefully held his grandson. 'His face looks like you but he has ninth son's nose.'

'Imperial father is right,' Yan Shi Ning said. 'He also has Pei Jin's eyelashes and Pei Jin's smile... hurry little treasure, smile with your imperial grandfather.'

Yan Shi Ning was coaxing her son to smile while gaging the emperor's reaction. Indeed the emperor relaxed and softened after he heard imperial grandfather.

Yan Shi Ning's heart cursed the emperor, 'you're only allowed to hold him this one time!'

'Imperial father, give nephew a name,' Pei Khan said.

The emperor had been busy with imperial court duties and didn't have time to name his grandson.

'Thirteenth son, what name do you think suits him?' the emperor asked.

'Thirteen brother, think of a meaningful name for your nephew,' Yan Shi Ning prompted.

Pei Khan thought deeply but he was only a five-year-old boy. So he looked in four directions and saw a little bird was flying. His eyes brightened and pointed at the bird outside the window.

‘Fly?’ Yan Shi Ning asked. ‘Thirteenth brother, do you want your nephew to be like the little bird so he can be free to fly?’

Pei Khan reluctantly nodded his head.

‘Pei Wen Fly...’ the emperor called. ‘Thirteenth son struggled to think of fly. But it doesn’t sound majestic. Let’s change fly to Fei, Pei Wen Fei. It’s a peaceful name.’

Yan Shi Ning thanked the emperor but Pei Khan wasn’t satisfied with his nephew’s name. Earlier he didn’t want to say fly, he wanted to say bird. He thought Pei Wen Niao and Xiao Niao were pleasant to hear.

Short Side Story Five

Xiao Fei: Pleasant to hear, your little sister!

Pei Khan: Pei Xiao Niao.

Xiao Fei: Little bird, your little sister!

Pei Khan: Pei Xiao Niao.

Xiao Fei: If you say it one more time, I’ll hit you!

Pei Khan: Pei Xiao Niao.

Xiao Fei: Cries.

Pei Khan: Be good. Don’t cry, rub, rub head.

Xiao Fei: Rub your little sister!

Chapter 72

'Mistress, Xiao Tu and young master is back!' Xiao Zai announced.

Pei Jin was playing chess with Bei Dou. After Pei Jin heard Yan Shi Ning was back, he threw the chess piece and ran outside.

Bei Dou looked like he didn't care but his legs ran fast.

The moment Yan Shi Ning carried her son and stepped out of the horse carriage, she saw everyone crowded together at the front of the manor. But her eyes solely focused on Pei Jin who stood at the centre.

Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning felt each day they were separated was like being separated for three autumns.

Yan Shi Ning wanted to run and hug Pei Jin. But Pei Jin ran to her and hugged her first.

'Our son!' Yan Shi Ning warned.

Pei Xiao Niao was squashed between his parents, his head ached and he cried loudly.

Pei Jin loosened his hold around Yan Shi Ning's waist and assessed their son.

'Why is he this ugly?' Pei Jin asked.

'Even if he is this ugly he's still your son!' Yan Shi Ning said.

Pei Xiao Niao was insulted by his father and cried louder.

That evening everyone held a reunion banquet. After the banquet Pei Jin asked a guard to watch over Pei Xiao Niao in the nursery. Then Pei Jin dragged Yan Shi Ning to their chamber, locked the door and kissed her against the door.

Pei Jin tasted the sweet wine on Yan Shi Ning's tongue. His hands slid down her dress and rubbed her plump breasts that were round and soft as soybeans. He felt like he could squeeze all the milk out of her breasts. He had been starved for too long so all his blood flowed between his legs.

Yan Shi Ning's body was responsive to Pei Jin's teasing, her body instinctively recognised his body. Her body turned limp the moment his hands touched her breasts. After he spread her legs wide apart, she couldn't stand steady.

'Not here,' Yan Shi Ning said.

Yan Shi Ning thought Pei Jin wanted to eat her at the door where other people could easily hear them.

Pei Jin carried Yan Shi Ning and kissed her lips on the way to the bed. He laid her on the bed and quickly took off their clothes. Afterward he pinned her to the bed and entered inside her.

A hard body and a soft body connected and their moans and groans mixed together in the chamber.

Pei Jin held Yan Shi Ning's waist and pounded in and out of her body. 'Did you miss me?'

Yan Shi Ning clutched Pei Jin's neck, raised her head and kissed him. She closed her eyes above her flushed red cheeks. 'How can I not miss you?'

Pei Jin wasn't satisfied with Yan Shi Ning's answer and punished her by thrusting hard and deep into her.

Pei Jin wanted to eat Yan Shi Ning ferociously that night to compensate for all the nights they were separated. She cooperated with him. They were entrapped inside their haze of desire. Her body peaked many times and each time her body trembled, she begged for mercy. After the haze slowly melted, she felt muscle pain and didn't have energy to move even her fingers and toes.

In contrast Pei Jin's desire was insatiable. After he saw Yan Shi Ning opened her eyes, he kissed her lips.

'No...' Yan Shi Ning pleaded.

Pei Jin smiled innocently. 'What do I do about this?'

Pei Jin pulled Yan Shi Ning's hand to rub his hard erection and she cried for mercy.

'I'm teasing you,' Pei Jin lied. 'Let's bathe together first.'

After a long time, half of the water inside the bath tub was splashed outside of the bath tub and Yan Shi Ning laid limp against Pei Jin's chest.

'Go see your son!' Yan Shi Ning surrendered.

Yan Shi Ning napped but was awoken by Pei Xiao Niao's loud cry. She opened her eyes and saw Pei Jin was carrying Pei Xiao Niao and sitting on a chair. Pei Jin looked frustrated and Pei Xiao Niao cried loudly.

Yan Shi Ning sat on the bed. 'What happened?'

'I only wanted to hold him but I didn't expect he would cry,' Pei Jin said. 'So I coaxed him to sleep... then this little scoundrel cried in his sleep!'

Yan Shi Ning picked up Pei Xiao Niao from Pei Jin's arms and coaxed him to sleep for a while but he didn't stop crying. So she took off her undergarments and breastfed Pei Xiao Niao.

Pei Xiao Niao stopped crying after he could smell milk. He suckled his mother's nipple and drank milk.

Yan Shi Ning patted Pei Xiao Niao's bottom and slowly coaxed him to sleep. She raised her head and feared for her life, Pei Jin was silently staring at her breasts.

Yan Shi Ning put Pei Xiao Niao back in his cot and returned to the bed.

‘In the future if you tease your son then you’re responsible for coaxing him to stop crying,’ Yan Shi Ning said. ‘Why did imperial father free me and your son?’

‘Imperial father’s heart grew compassion,’ Pei Jin said.

‘Why?’ Yan Shi Ning asked.

‘Shi Ning, do you want to know why seventh brother was willing to kill Dian Thi’s son?’ Pei Jin asked.

Yan Shi Ning’s eyes brightened.

‘Dian Thi’s son... isn’t seventh brother’s blood son,’ Pei Jin said.

‘What?’ Yan Shi Ning asked. ‘How did you find out?’

‘From a spy in the palace,’ Pei Jin said.

Chapter 73

A month ago Wang Fu Mu secretly met Xiao Nu in the palace.

‘Official Wang, on the day of the emperor’s birthday banquet I heard Consort Mu said seventh prince’s second wife’s son must be killed,’ Xiao Nu said. ‘Official Wang, ninth prince’s wife was framed...’

Wang Fu Mu inwardly smiled while he listened to Xiao Nu confessing Consort Mu’s scheme to gain his favor.

That day the emperor summoned Pei Jin to the palace to receive an edict to go to Xuan Qing. Wang Fu Mu secretly passed a folded note to Pei Jin before Pei Jin left the palace.

Later that day Pei Jin read the note in the horse carriage, ‘hates bastard son.’

Pei Jin didn't expect Pei Zhang wore a headdress of a fool and understood why Pei Zhang killed Dian Thi's son, the boy wasn't Pei Zhang's blood son.

Pei Jin knew Pei Zhang's motive so he sent his guards to Pei Zhang's manor to find evidence he and Yan Shi Ning were framed. His guards reported in the last three months there were two deaths in Pei Zhang's manor, a guard named Feng Lang and Dian Thi's personal maid Xiao Hai.

Pei Jin smiled coldly, Feng Lang was the father of Dian Thi's son. Pei Jin thought of a plan to spread the news to his father without being implicated.

'Why are you so calm?' Bei Dou asked. 'Don't you want your wife and my wife to return to the manor?'

'Wait another three days,' Pei Jin said.

Bei Dou glared at Pei Jin, another three days they would be in Xuan Qing. He hated suffering with Pei Jin.

After three days Pei Jin and Bei Dou arrived in Xuan Qing. Bei Dou hated the way Pei Jin wasn't anxious being away from the imperial city while their wives were held captive in the palace.

'Wait another ten days,' Pei Jin said. 'We'll return home and be reunited with our wives.'

In a busy restaurant in the imperial city two gentlemen were gossiping about Pei Zhang.

'Did you hear seventh prince is wearing a beautiful headdress of a fool?' the first gentleman asked.

'How do you know this rumor is true?' the second gentleman asked.

'I'll tell you how I found out but you have to promise not to tell another person,' the first gentleman said. 'I heard seventh prince's second wife's dead son isn't his blood son.'

'Truly?' the second gentleman asked.

'Of course,' the first gentleman said. 'I have a close acquaintance who works at seventh prince's manor.'

'I see... but who would dare to sleep with seventh prince's woman?' the second gentleman asked.

'Didn't you hear about how seventh prince's trusted guard Feng Lang mysteriously died?' the first gentleman asked.

'Um, how is Feng Lang's death related to this rumor?' the second gentleman asked.

'You fool... think about why a healthy man like Feng Lang would die at a young age,' the first gentleman said.

'I see... you're saying-' the second gentleman said.

'It's a secret!' the first gentleman said. 'You can't say the secret.'

The two gentleman looked in four directions, everyone in the busy restaurant were eavesdropping on their conversation.

The two gentleman left the restaurant and took off their disguises in a remote alley and looked like their usual selves, Xiao Hui and Xiao Zai.

Xiao Hui and Xiao Zai's secret conversation spread throughout the imperial city within a few days.

Pei Zhang was furious after he heard everyone in the imperial city knew the truth about the bastard child. Pei Zhang beat Dian Thi to vent his anger and summoned everyone from his manor into the courtyard. He knew someone inside the manor betrayed him. Everyone in the manor denied they didn't betray him and blamed each other.

After the interrogation because of Pei Zhang's panicked reaction to the rumor, he realised he fell into Pei Jin's trap and soon their father would find out the truth.

At Pei Jin's manor Yan Shi Ning thought the Pei Jin fox was impressive.

'Wife, do you think your husband is impressive?' Pei Jin asked.

'Husband, how did imperial father find out?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'Imperial father likes to pass by remote areas in the palace gardens... to eavesdrop on eunuchs and palace maids gossiping,' Pei Jin said. 'Thanks to Xiao Hui and Xiao Zai, seventh brother's secret was spread to the palace.'

'Are you saying imperial father sent people to investigate the rumor at seventh prince's manor and confirmed seventh prince framed us?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'Imperial father suspected Dian Thi committed adultery long ago and that seventh prince framed us,' Pei Jin. 'Imperial father knows seventh brother would rather die than admit the truth. So imperial father let you go and he can only curse seventh brother.'

'Seventh prince still wins if imperial father can't punish him,' Yan Shi Ning said.

'Shi Ning, be patient and you can eat hot tofu,' Pei Jin said. 'Seventh brother knows imperial father is watching him closely and he won't dare to make any moves otherwise he'll make imperial father angrier.'

In the palace Pei Zhang knelt in front of his father and hit his forehead on the floor.

'Imperial father, I haven't mistreated Dian Thi... but she betrayed me like this,' Pei Zhang said. 'I'm heart broken. I didn't want to hide the truth but I considered Dian Thi's family so I kept it a secret.'

‘Are you certain you didn’t keep it a secret so after Dian Thi gives birth you can become the crown prince?’ the emperor asked.

‘Imperial father, I was foolish,’ Pei Zhang said. ‘Imperial father, forgive me. I know I deserve to die. But I promise it wasn’t me who framed ninth brother. That day I was angry someone harmed Dian Thi and said those heavy words to ninth sister... imperial father, I promise I don’t have an ulterior motive. It wasn’t me.’

Pei Zhang hit his forehead pitifully on the ground and hid his resentment toward Pei Jin.

Pei Zhang knew deceiving the emperor by using a bastard son as a bridge to become the crown prince and attempting to kill Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning’s son were crimes that wouldn’t escape death. Of course Pei Zhang would never admit the truth.

The emperor’s head ached to see Pei Zhang acting convincingly in a I’ll-tear-my-heart-out state of mind. It was a frustrating to death to witness it. Even though in the past he was guilty of using similar tactics, he still didn’t condone Pei Zhang’s actions. He felt helpless. Did he choose the wrong son?

‘Imperial father, I have something important I want to report,’ Pei Zhang said.

‘Say it,’ the emperor said.

‘Recently I’ve been suspicious of ninth brother and my guards have followed him... ninth brother is stronger than he appears,’ Pei Zhang said.

‘How?’ the emperor asked.

Pei Zhang was impressed his mother was right about his father’s weariness toward Pei Jin.

‘Imperial father, my guards discovered ninth brother’s guards are exceptionally strong,’ Pei Zhang said. ‘If ninth brother is gentle and weak then how can he afford to raise strong guards?’

Pei Zhang was happy to see his father silently planning to expose Pei Jin’s real capabilities. His mother was right, his father hated Pei Jin.

After the emperor dismissed Pei Zhang, he put down his brush. He didn’t know if Pei Zhang was truly a filial son and he wasn’t certain Pei Jin was hiding ulterior motives. He smiled coldly, he planned a way to see his sons’ true hearts.

Chapter 74

The emperor collapsed.

The palace was in chaos, the emperor was unconscious after someone saw the emperor spat out blood and the emperor’s consorts and princes were forbidden to enter the emperor’s chamber.

The court officials feared if the emperor didn’t wake up in a few days then there would be a bloody war in the palace since the crown prince position was vacant.

Luckily two days later the emperor woke up.

Inside Consort Mu’s chamber Pei Zhang interrogated a eunuch.

‘Did you say inside imperial father’s hidden edict, he wants ninth prince to be the crown prince?’ Pei Zhang asked the eunuch.

‘Seventh prince, I saw it while the emperor showed it to Gentleman Yang,’ the eunuch said on his knees. ‘Then I secretly came here to report to seventh prince.’

‘What did Gentleman Yang say?’ Pei Zhang asked.

‘Gentleman Yang said the emperor’s body is weak and he feared the emperor’s medicine couldn’t prolong the emperor’s life for much longer,’ the eunuch said. ‘Then the emperor said if in the future he becomes unconscious for more than a few days then Gentleman Yang should euthanized him.’

Consort Mu panicked. What would happen if Gentleman Yang granted the emperor’s request?

Pei Zhang dismissed the eunuch.

‘Mother, what should we do?’ Pei Zhang asked. ‘Mother, didn’t you say imperial father wouldn’t give the crown prince position to ninth brother?’

‘Your imperial father’s heart is hard to see,’ Consort Mu said. ‘Besides, I said that before Dian Thi’s incident! You don’t have an heir and your imperial father doesn’t love you. It’s reasonable your imperial father would choose your ninth brother.’

‘Are we going to wait to witness ninth brother sit on the throne?’ Pei Zhang asked.

‘Your imperial father hid the edict and hasn’t announced it because he’s still indecisive,’ Consort Mu said.

‘If imperial father wrote the edict it shows who he chose,’ Pei Zhang said. ‘He hasn’t announced it but it doesn’t mean it won’t be announced later. If that happens then ninth prince’s boat is built!’

‘What do you want to do?’ Consort Mu asked. ‘Go to your imperial father’s chamber and tear the edict? If you do that then prepare to give up everything.’

‘Mother!’ Pei Zhang said.

Consort Mu frowned.

‘Mother, you’re right,’ Pei Zhang said.

‘What are you planning to do?’ Consort Mu asked.

‘I should steal the edict before it’s announced,’ Pei Zhang said.

‘Reckless fool!’ Consort Mu said.

‘What reckless fool?’ Pei Zhang said. ‘We’ve built our power over many years and many court officials support us. It’s easy for us to sneak into imperial father’s chamber in the middle of the night. We can force imperial father to change the edict.’

‘If your imperial father refuses do you intend to kill your imperial father and steal the throne?’ Consort Mu asked.

‘If imperial father rather dies than change it then I’ll grant his request,’ Pei Zhang said.

Consort Mu’s whole body was cold like ice.

‘Mother, if ninth brother sits on the throne you know he won’t spare our lives,’ Pei Zhang said. ‘It’s better if I steal the throne before the edict is announced. Otherwise if I wait to steal the throne after ninth brother is the emperor, we’ll become traitors in the eyes of citizens and they’ll rebel.’

Consort Mu thought about Pei Zhang’s logic and she fisted her hands.

‘Mother...’ Pei Zhang said.

‘Wait,’ Consort Mu said. ‘Don’t do anything reckless. Let me confirm something and we can discuss what to do afterward.’

‘Confirm what?’ Pei Zhang asked.

‘I want to see Gentleman Tao,’ Consort Mu said.

That evening Consort Mu secretly met Gentleman Tao and they spoke through a door hole.

‘I want to ask you something,’ Consort Mu said.

‘Yes,’ Tao Ping said.

‘How is the emperor?’ Consort Mu asked.

‘His majesty has two years,’ Tao Ping said.

‘Truly?’ Consort Mu asked.

‘Before the crown prince and the empress died, his majesty had four to five years,’ Tao Ping said.

‘What about the rumor the emperor only has a few days to live?’
Consort Mu asked.

Consort Mu was anxious why Gentleman Tao didn’t answer her. She looked through the hole and only saw the night’s darkness.

‘Why aren’t you saying anything?’ Consort Mu asked.

‘His majesty is manoeuvring a chess piece,’ Tao Ping said. ‘The emperor ordered if anyone exposes his plan then they’ll be killed immediately.’

‘What is the emperor’s purpose?’ Consort Mu asked.

‘His majesty wants to see who’ll support seventh prince and who’ll support ninth prince,’ Tao Ping said. ‘Whoever acts recklessly first then the emperor won’t spare them. Consort Mu, I hope you’ll patiently wait to see what happens.’

‘Alright,’ Consort Mu said. ‘Why didn’t you find me earlier to report to me about something this important?’

‘Consort Mu, you were born intelligent,’ Tao Ping praised. ‘Of course you’ll see through his majesty’s plan.’

Consort Mu farewell Gentleman Tao and left.

In the emperor’s chamber Wang Fu Mu stayed by the emperor’s bedside, he didn’t dare leave the chamber to warn Pei Jin. He hoped Pei Jin would see through the emperor’s plan.

Chapter 75

News of the emperor's collapse spread across the imperial city.

At Pei Jin's manor Pei Xiao Niao was crying for his mother but his mother was napping.

Pei Jin picked up Pei Xiao Niao from the cot and played with him on a chair.

It was a sunny day and the chubby Pei Xiao Niao wore thin pink clothes.

Pei Jin happily held the chubby Pei Xiao Niao in one arm and teased Pei Xiao Niao with a small soft colourful cuju ball with his free hand.

Pei Xiao Niao's round eyes brightened and followed the cuju ball's movements. He raised his short arms in the air but his father didn't give him the cuju ball.

Pei Jin moved the cuju ball close to his son. Each time his son was about to grab the cuju ball, he moved the cuju ball away. He smiled while he teased his son but his son's lips pouted and his son cried loudly.

Pei Jin coaxed his son who loved to cry because he didn't want to disturb Yan Shi Ning's nap.

'Ninth prince, Huang Guo is here to see you,' a servant said.

'I understand,' Pei Jin said.

Pei Jin looked at his son who stopped crying. His son had grabbed the cuju ball while he was distracted. He smiled at his son who was happily playing with the cuju ball.

Pei Jin saw his son was about to eat the cuju ball and gently pulled the cuju ball away from his son's mouth.

'Son, why are you a glutton like your mother?' Pei Jin asked.

Pei Xiao Niao was about to cry because his father stole his food but his father stood and hugged him tightly. He looked over his father's shoulder and saw a stranger.

'Ninth prince, your son is handsome,' Huang Guo praised.

'Elder is too kind,' Pei Jin said. 'My son isn't handsome.'

Pei Jin thought his son was ugly when his son was a wrinkled one month boy. But after raising his son for two months, his son was growing more handsome by the day.

'Indeed he has a majestic aura,' Huang Guo praised.

Pei Jin smiled and gestured for Huang Guo to sit.

Pei Jin sat down on a chair. He hugged his son and bounced his son on his knees.

Pei Xiao Niao happily sucked the soft round bun his father gave him and he looked at the stranger in front of him.

'I came to discuss something with ninth prince,' Huang Guo said.

'Elder's face looks serious,' Pei Jin said. 'It must be important.'

'Something serious happened,' Huang Guo said.

'What?' Pei Jin asked.

'The emperor wrote an edict,' Huang Guo said. 'Congratulations ninth prince, the emperor chose you to be the crown prince.'

Pei Jin didn't expect his father would choose him to be the crown prince.

Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning's happy reunion was interrupted by the news of his father's collapse. He heard the rumor about his father only had a few days to left so he sent his guards to the palace to investigate but didn't find anything unusual. He and Yan Shi Ning could only patiently wait at home.

Huang Guo's news made Pei Jin's heart jump chaotically but he maintained his calm appearance.

'We should seize this opportunity,' Huang Guo said.

Pei Jin narrowed his eyes.

'The emperor wrote the edict but he hasn't announced it,' Huang Guo said. 'It means he's still indecisive. We should act and the throne is yours.'

Pei Jin hugged his son tighter and realised he did care about who his father wanted to give the throne to.

Huang Guo thought finally his years of scheming didn't become smoke.

'Everything is prepared,' Huang Guo said.

Huang Guo's army only needed his command and his army would march into the palace.

Pei Jin's son's cry broke his deep thoughts. His son had urinated on his knees.

Luckily Pei Jin's son cried otherwise he would have lost sight at what was most important. He had always been cautious and understood his status. His father's decision and Huang Guo's persuasion had disrupted his plan... he was truly grateful for his son.

Pei Jin stood, carried his son in his arms and smiled. If he didn't have his son then in that moment he would have made an irreversible mistake. He had his wife and son, he couldn't be selfish and risk their lives to make a dangerous chess move. Besides, Wang Fu Mu's silence was the biggest warning. Wang Fu Mu's silence meant if he made a reckless move then he and his family would die.

Pei Jin's chaotic heart calmed. 'I truly only want to be a carefree prince.'

Huang Guo wanted to vomit blood.

A servant escorted Huang Guo to the horse carriage.

Pei Jin kissed his son's cheeks and happily ran to the chamber to change his son's clothes.

'Son, be good,' Pei Jin coaxed. 'You're my good son. Don't cry.'

Pei Xiao Niao didn't know his father was grateful he urinated on his father's knees and restored his father's common sense, he continued to cry because his pants were wet.

Pei Xiao Niao's loud cry woke up Yan Shi Ning.

Pei Xiao Niao saw his mother, stretched his arms toward his mother and cried louder.

'You're not allowed to cry!' Yan Shi Ning said.

Pei Xiao Niao was startled his mother raised her voice. He pouted his lips, buried his head in his father's chest and didn't dare to cry.

Yan Shi Ning noticed her son's pants were wet. She picked up her son from Pei Jin's arms and changed her son's clothes.

'Earlier did Huang Guo visit you?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'Um' Pei Jin said.

'What's happening in the palace?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'I heard imperial father wrote an edict to make seventh brother the crown prince,' Pei Jin lied.

'What should we do?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'Wait and see what happens,' Pei Jin said. 'I think there's something suspicious about the news. Huang Guo wants to lend his army to me for me to steal the throne. But I don't dare. Wan Fu Mu hasn't send news to me so I don't want to do anything reckless.'

‘What if the news is true?’ Yan Shi Ning asked. ‘Do we watch Pei Zhang sit on the throne?’

‘If it’s true then we’ll escape to Southern Jiang,’ Pei Jin said. ‘He can’t kill us if we’re not in the imperial city. Besides, I don’t have enough people in our home to defeat Huang Guo’s army.’

‘But it’s not fair,’ Yan Shi Ning said.

Yan Shi Ning wouldn’t accept Pei Zhang as the emperor and she didn’t think the emperor was fair toward Pei Jin.

Pei Jin held Yan Shi Ning’s hand. It wasn’t the right time for him to make a move.

Pei Jin waited days for his father’s edict, each day was like waiting a year. But the edict didn’t come so he didn’t make a move.

In the palace Wang Fu Mu was as anxious as Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning. Wang Fu Mu hated relying on an outsider, but he had no choice if he wanted to protect Pei Jin and Pei Jin’s family.

Wang Fu Mu walked to the secret spot in the palace gardens where Xiao Nu raised a cat. Luckily Xiao Nu was feeding the cat.

‘Tomorrow give this handkerchief to ninth prince’s wife in the Tang Ming courtyard,’ Wang Fu Mu said. ‘Keep it a secret otherwise both of us will die with no proper burial.’

That night Xiao Nu didn’t sleep. The handkerchief Wang Fu Mu gave her felt too heavy.

Xiao Nu didn’t know why Wang Fu Mu asked her to give the handkerchief to ninth prince’s wife and she wasn’t familiar with ninth prince and ninth prince’s wife. But it was enough that she knew Wang Fu Mu treated her kindly and never bullied her.

Early the following morning she secretly hid in the Tang Ming courtyard and she waited for ninth prince’s wife.

That morning Wang Fu Mu stayed in the emperor's chamber and gambled everything on Pei Jin's habit of passing through the Tang Ming courtyard to walk to the emperor's courtyard.

Later that morning Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning was passing through the Tang Ming courtyard and they were startled an unfamiliar palace maid stopped them. But they relaxed after the palace maid gave Yan Shi Ning a handkerchief and told them it was from Wang Fu Mu.

Xiao Nu bowed to ninth prince and ninth prince's wife then she quickly left.

'What does this handkerchief mean?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

There was only a riddle on the handkerchief, 'two people raising their heads smiling, only saying savor.'

Pei Jin knew Wang Fu Mu was more cautious than he was so he was still startled Wang Fu Mu would rely on an outsider to warn him. But he thought deeply about what the handkerchief meant.

Pei Jin stared at the handkerchief for a long time and realised he thought too deeply. Wang Fu Mu wasn't an educated scholar so for Wang Fu Mu to write a riddle and use an outsider then the situation was serious.

Pei Jin thought about how Wang Fu Mu spoke. Each time Wang Fu Mu spoke, Wang Fu Mu would emphasized the first word. Pei Jin looked at 'two' and 'only.' 'Liang Zhi' sounded similar to 'Zhao Shu' which meant edict. Pei Jin shivered, his father was too ruthless.

'Imperial father isn't dying,' Pei Jin said. 'He's pretending to be ill and wanted to see who would commit treason after receiving news of the unannounced edict.'

'Imperial father is too insane,' Yan Shi Ning said. 'But if your speculation is true then it's strange that someone impatient like Pei Zhang hasn't acted recklessly.'

Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning thought about why Pei Zhang didn't kill the emperor then they looked at each other at the same time.

'Who do you think is their spy in the palace?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'The five people who are allowed to enter imperial father's chamber are Wang Fu Mu and his four most trusted imperial physicians,' Pei Jin said. 'We know it isn't Wang Fu Mu so it's one of the four imperial physicians.'

'Pei Jin, how do you think imperial father will react if he knew we found out what chess piece he's using?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'Perhaps imperial father will become more insane,' Pei Jin said.

Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning smiled at each other.

'Shi Ning, I wasn't certain us waiting to see what happens would benefit us but now I know it was the right decision,' Pei Jin said. 'What do you think seventh brother wants the most?'

'He wants us to lose to imperial father's chess piece,' Yan Shi Ning said. 'Why?'

Pei Jin smiled. 'We'll grant his wish.'

Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning walked to the emperor's courtyard where a large crowd gathered.

Pei Khan was overjoyed to see Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning.

Pei Khan pulled Yan Shi Ning's sleeve. 'Where's my nephew?'

Yan Shi Ning saw the anticipation in Pei Khan's eyes and she didn't want to tell him the bad news. 'Your nephew is sleeping at... home.'

Pei Khan scrunched his face and frowned. He missed his nephew Xiao Niao a lot.

Later that day Pei Zhang returned to his manor and he was grateful his mother met Gentleman Tao and found out about his father's plan. Otherwise he would have acted recklessly and lost his life.

Pei Zhang looked at the bright sky and anticipated his new status. He only needed to wait for Pei Jin to make the wrong move. If he was Pei Jin, he wouldn't do nothing if he found out news about their father's hidden edict for Pei Jin to be the crown prince. But if Pei Jin didn't do anything, it meant Pei Jin truly wanted to be a carefree prince. Then he wouldn't win or lose and their father's plan was meaningless.

'Seventh prince, ninth prince made a move,' a guard said.

'Hurry and say it,' Pei Zhang said.

'Ninth prince is hiding people inside his manor,' the guard said.

Pei Zhang was happy he ordered his guards to follow Pei Jin closely. He thought Pei Jin must have received news of their father's edict and secretly hid Huang Guo's men in Pei Jin's manor.

'Seventh prince, I and the other guards secretly searched their horse carriages,' the guards said. 'The horse carriages are full of cannon balls and arrows.'

Pei Zhang laughed triumphantly. 'Keep following him and his guards. Report to me immediately if any of them make any sudden movements.'

Pei Zhang was happy while waiting a few days for Pei Jin to strike. But after a few days he gritted his teeth, Pei Jin didn't strike and he was worried that Pei Jin decided to retreat.

'Are you certain he hasn't made any sudden moves?' Pei Zhang asked the guard.

'I'm certain,' the guards said. 'But ninth prince's guards have been collecting water from neighbouring wells.'

'Water?' Pei Zhang asked.

'Yes but I and the guards secretly checked it was only water,' the guard said.

'What about his people?' Pei Zhang asked.

'None of them made any sudden movements either,' the guard said.

Half a shichen hour later the guard returned to Pei Zhang's manor.

'Ninth prince instructed his guards to prepare to strike!' the guard said.

Pei Zhang was happy to receive good news again. He waited for another two shichen hours but Pei Jin and his guards were stationary.

'Are you certain he told his guards to prepare to strike?' Pei Zhang asked the guard.

'I'm certain,' the guard said.

'Take more guards with you and ensure no one leaves his manor!' Pei Zhang said. 'I'm going to the palace.'

At Pei Jin's manor Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning were happily playing chess together.

'Ninth prince, seventh prince's sent more guards here and seventh prince is travelling to the palace,' a guard reported and left the chamber.

'Wife, the fish took the bait,' Pei Jin said.

'Checkmate,' Yan Shi Ning said.

Chapter 76

Pei Zhang entered the palace in the middle of the night.

The emperor waited many days for his sons to make a move. Finally one of his sons dared to unlock palace gates after curfew. He got out of bed and wore his outer robe.

‘Your majesty, seventh prince asked to see your majesty,’ an imperial guard said. ‘Seventh prince said it was important.’

‘I understand,’ the emperor said.

The emperor was disappointed it was only one of his sons.

Pei Zhang entered his father’s chamber and bowed. ‘Imperial father, have you recovered?’

The emperor feigned a cough. He didn’t believe Pei Zhang’s filial son act. ‘Seventh son, what is so important that you needed to see me in the middle of the night?’

‘Imperial father, I found out ninth brother is prepared for a rebellion!’ Pei Zhang said.

The emperor assessed Pei Zhang. He needed to see for himself if Pei Jin truly intended to rebel as Pei Zhang reported.

‘Imperial father, my guards have followed ninth brother’s suspicious activities for many days,’ Pei Zhang said. ‘Ninth brother is hiding Huang Guo’s men in his manor. Imperial father, what are you going to do?’

‘Do what?’ the emperor asked.

Pei Zhang shivered to see his father’s intimidating aura.

‘Imperial father, I have a request,’ Pei Zhang said.

‘Say it,’ the emperor said.

‘Imperial father, if ninth brother truly wants to rebel... imperial father please forgive ninth brother for his ignorant offence,’ Pei Zhang said.

The emperor narrowed his eyes.

‘Imperial father, I believe others are forcing ninth brother to rebel,’ Pei Zhang said. ‘This is why I wanted to report to imperial father so

imperial father can persuade ninth brother not to commit treason.
Imperial father... I don't want to lose another brother.'

Pei Zhang was satisfied he looked like a loving and forgiving older brother.

'Come with me to your ninth brother's manor!' the emperor ordered coldly.

Pei Zhang anticipated Pei Jin's fall and death.

The emperor didn't care about Pei Zhang's ulterior motives. He knew he wasn't young anymore and if one of his sons wanted to rebel then he needed to uproot their resources before a rebellion.

The emperor commanded an army of soldiers he hid nearby the palace to follow him to Pei Jin's manor.

Pei Zhang finally understood why his father wasn't scared of leaving the palace, his father was always secretly prepared for a rebellion.

'Seventh son, sit in my horse carriage,' the emperor said.

Pei Zhang shivered. Inside his father's horse carriage he would be defenceless, his father didn't trust him. His father was suspicious of him and wouldn't hesitate to use him as a hostage if he was part of Pei Jin's rebellion.

Pei Zhang obediently sat inside his father's horse carriage. His back stiffened, his father and his father's imperial guards sharp eyes were focused on him. The thought of Pei Jin being on the receiving end of his father's sword comforted him.

The moment Pei Zhang stepped out the horse carriage, his father's army surrounded Pei Jin's manor.

Moonlight shone on the soldiers armed with swords, bows and arrows. They stood in stances ready to attack at the emperor's command.

'Imperial father, do you want to go inside?' Pei Zhang asked.

The emperor was suspicious why Pei Jin's manor was too quiet.

'Um,' the emperor said.

After the soldier knocked thrice on the door, a young handsome servant opened the door.

The servant rubbed his eyes. 'What is it... why are you knocking on the door in the middle of the night... ah! Heavens! Why are there so many armed people?'

Afterward the lanterns in Pei Jin's manor were lit and everyone rushed outside to see what was causing the commotion.

Pei Xiao Niao's sleep was disturbed and he cried loudly.

Pei Zhang was confused why everyone at Pei Jin's manor were in their night clothes and unarmed.

Pei Jin saw his father and bowed. 'Imperial father? Imperial father, why are you here?'

The emperor wasn't pleased his careful plan was wasted by waking up unarmed people in the middle of the night. What rebellion? He was suspicious why Pei Zhang dared to deceive him!

'Imperial father, he's hiding people inside!' Pei Zhang said in a panicked tone.

Pei Zhang was determined to ensure Pei Jin wouldn't escape death that night.

The emperor's soldiers searched everywhere inside Pei Jin's manor. There were no hidden people inside Pei Jin's manor.

Pei Zhang didn't know why his father's soldiers didn't find Huang Guo's hidden men or the concealed weapons. It was impossible for Pei Jin to send the hidden men and weapons outside the manor undetected.

Pei Jin was kneeling but it was Pei Zhang who shivered fearfully.

Yan Shi Ning was kneeling next to Pei Jin and coaxing Pei Xiao Niao to sleep.

‘Imperial father, what is happening?’ Yan Shi Ning asked.

Chapter 77

The emperor and soldiers resented Pei Zhang’s wolf cry.

‘Imperial father, don’t let him fool you,’ Pei Zhang said. ‘Imperial father, let me check inside.’

‘Alright,’ the emperor said coldly.

Pei Zhang led his guards inside. He checked every nook of Pei Jin’s manor and didn’t find anyone or anything suspicious.

‘Where are they?’ Pei Zhang asked. ‘Where are the weapons?’

‘Seventh prince, we didn’t see anyone leave ninth prince’s manor,’ the guard said.

‘Useless!’ Pei Zhang said. ‘How can people and weapons disappear?’

Pei Zhang knew his guards wouldn’t dare deceive him. It was Pei Jin who built a trap for him!

‘Imperial father, are you searching my manor because you suspect I’m hiding rebels?’ Pei Jin asked sadly.

The emperor’s complex eyes looked at Pei Jin.

‘Ninth brother, where are you hiding your people?’ Pei Zhang asked.

‘Seventh brother, what people are you referring to?’ Pei Jin asked confusedly.

‘Assassins!’ Pei Zhang said. ‘Weapons! Ninth brother, don’t pretend you don’t know where they are!’

Pei Jin laughed coldly. 'Seventh brother, you searched everywhere and you know clearly there are no assassins and weapons here.'

Pei Zhang fisted his hands, Pei Jin turned him into a paranoid fool in front of everyone!

'Ninth brother, you framed me!' Pei Zhang said.

'Seventh brother, why would I frame you?' Pei Jin asked.

Everyone understood it was impossible for Pei Jin to frame Pei Zhang. It was Pei Zhang who requested the emperor's army to search Pei Jin's manor. Also Pei Jin cooperated without resistance and didn't hide any assassins or weapons.

'Seventh brother, between us who is framing who?' Pei Jin asked.

'What are you saying?' Pei Zhang asked.

'Seventh brother, it's not hard to see imperial father wouldn't bring an army here unless you convinced imperial father I wanted to commit treason,' Pei Jin said. 'Seventh brother, tell me where am I hiding assassins and weapons?'

Pei Zhang couldn't refute Pei Jin's accusations.

'Seventh brother, why did you deceive imperial father?' Pei Jin asked.

'Ninth brother, are you saying I deceived imperial father to frame you?' Pei Zhang asked.

'Seventh brother, your heart's intentions are too deep for me to see,' Pei Jin said.

Pei Zhang wanted to vomit blood.

The emperor assessed his strong son and his weak son. He believed Pei Zhang wouldn't deceive him because Pei Zhang wouldn't gain anything by deceiving him. But he believed Pei Jin wasn't a fool and wouldn't do

something reckless to frame Pei Zhang. He didn't know between Pei Zhang and Pei Jin who was innocent.

'Your majesty, a troop of soldiers are invading the army camp and another troop of soldiers are approaching here!' a soldier reported.

The emperor glared daggers at Pei Zhang. He knew Pei Zhang had his guards positioned around the imperial city. Also Pei Zhang was the one who requested him to take his army here.

'Everyone protect the emperor and kill the traitors!' the general ordered.

'Seventh son, confess!' the emperor said.

'Imperial father, I don't know what's happening either,' Pei Zhang said.

'Seventh brother, your chess manoeuvre is too deadly!' Pei Jin said.

'Ninth son, what are you implying?' the emperor asked.

'Imperial father, earlier I wondered why seventh brother would deceive you and request you to bring an army here,' Pei Jin said. 'Seventh brother wants to use the strategy of making a sound in the east and striking in the west.'

Pei Jin knew he didn't need to say anymore. Pei Zhang's request to bring their father's army here was the best evidence to prove Pei Jin's innocence.

The emperor grabbed an imperial guard's sword and the sword tip pointed at Pei Zhang's throat.

Pei Zhang knelt in front of his father. 'Imperial father, I was framed!' He glared at Pei Jin. 'Ninth brother, you framed me!'

'Who framed who?' Pei Jin asked. 'Seventh brother, I considered our brotherly bond and endured your vicious slander against me and my family! On the day of imperial father's birthday banquet, you accused my wife of killing your second wife's son. But I didn't begrudge you because I believed the heavens would reward me and my family justice.'

But I can't let you continually frame me and my family anymore. Seventh brother, you accused me of treason. Look around you, it's your people that are attacking! How can I control your people?'

Pei Jin acted like he was deeply hurt by Pei Zhang's betrayal.

'Seventh brother, imperial father hasn't declared who he wants to give the throne to,' Pei Jin said. 'Are you scared in the future if you sit on throne, it won't be stable? Is that why you planned this?'

'Nonsense!' Pei Zhang said. 'You know imperial father wants to give the throne to me that's why you framed me! Imperial father, don't listen to his lies, he has ulterior motives-'

The emperor's sword nipped Pei Zhang's throat.

'Seventh son, how do you know I want to give you the throne?' the emperor asked suspiciously.

Pei Zhang's whole body turned cold, he realised he recklessly said too much.

Chapter 78

The emperor's army slaughtered their enemies.

The imperial guards secured Pei Jin's manor while the emperor's army fought Pei Zhang's men outside.

'Your majesty, assassins are found hidden inside seventh prince's manor,' the imperial guard reported.

The emperor slapped Pei Zhang's cheek.

'You dare to say you're innocent?' the emperor asked.

Pei Zhang didn't expect ambushing Pei Jin would lead to him being framed. He lost a chess piece, the battle and everything. All his schemes

failed. He couldn't kill Pei Jin and Pei Jin's family. His father didn't trust him and he was at a disadvantage because he had no heir. Framing Pei Jin of treason was his last chess piece but it backfired and he lost pitifully.

Everyone believed Pei Zhang had planned to lure the emperor to Pei Jin's manor. Afterward Pei Zhang's men would kill the emperor, Pei Jin and Pei Jin's family. Pei Zhang would have deceived the citizens of Dian Kingdom to believe Pei Jin committed treason and killed the emperor. So the citizens and court officials would have easily accepted Pei Zhang as their ruler.

The emperor didn't want to believe Pei Zhang wanted to kill him and Pei Jin, Pei Zhang's flesh and blood. But the battle outside was enough to prove Pei Zhang's guilt.

Pei Jin appeared weak and saddened that Pei Zhang betrayed him and their father. But the truth was Pei Jin had planned to use a crucial chess piece that night long ago.

Pei Jin's plan started after Consort La's death. Consort La requested him and Yan Shi Ning to protect Pei Khan. If he wanted to protect his family and Pei Khan then he would need more guards at his manor. If he couldn't hide how strong he was anymore then it was better for him to 'accidentally' expose his real strength to Pei Zhang.

Pei Jin knew Pei Zhang's guards spied on his manor in four directions. He asked one of his guards to strike one of Pei Zhang's guards in the middle of the night so Pei Zhang's injured guard could report to Pei Zhang what happened.

Pei Jin was amused at Pei Zhang's smugness. It was amusing for a hunter to mislead a prey to think it outwitted the hunter.

Pei Jin's next step was to let Pei Zhang's guards see him sneak men and weapons into the manor so Pei Zhang would confidently report to their father in the palace. Their father had been suspicious of him long ago and he was certain their father would bring Pei Zhang to his manor to

investigate. Of course he would let their father investigate and see Pei Zhang's 'treason'.

If Pei Zhang didn't use Dian Thi's son to try to kill Pei Jin's wife and son then Pei Jin wouldn't have accepted Elder Ma's offer. Of course Pei Jin wouldn't spare anyone who dared to harm his wife and son.

Elder Ma had sent Pei Jin a letter, 'the salty fishes you raised have bred. They're delicious, I'll send you five hundred salty fishes first for you to savor.'

Salty fish was the Southern Jiang's general's code name. Elder Ma sent five hundred salty fishes to Pei Jin's manor while five hundred of the Southern Jiang's general's men secretly sneaked into the imperial city. Elder Ma refused to stand idly after Elder Ma received news someone attempted to frame Pei Jin and kill Pei Jin's family. The five hundred men were a precaution to protect Pei Jin and Pei Jin's family.

Pei Jin hid Elder Ma's letter and knew five hundred men were excessive to protect him and his family. Elder Ma had intended for the five hundred men to eliminate his enemy's army.

Pei Jin's plan was disrupted by his father's plan to act like his father was dying and the edict to make him crown prince. If his son didn't remind him what was important, he would have acted recklessly and used the five hundred men to seize the throne.

Luckily Pei Jin let go of his thought to seize the throne. So he waited for his father to die and if Pei Zhang sat on the throne then he would use the five hundred men to escort him and his family safely back to Southern Jiang.

After Wang Fu Mu sent news to Pei Jin about his father's plan, Pei Jin realised he had evaded a deadly storm. His father's plan also gave Pei Jin an opportunity to make Pei Zhang suffer for harming his wife and son.

Pei Jin and the five hundred men waited for Pei Zhang to take the bait.

Pei Jin understood Pei Zhang well. Pei Zhang would have died long ago if Pei Zhang wasn't Consort Mu's son. Pei Zhang would never be as intelligent as Pei Lam. Without Consort Mu's guidance, Pei Zhang was useless. So Pei Jin wanted to lure Pei Zhang at night. Pei Zhang couldn't seek Consort Mu's guidance at night.

Pei Jin was amused how fast Pei Zhang ran to the palace to report to their father about men and weapons hidden in his manor.

While Pei Zhang's guards were running to Pei Jin's manor, the five hundred men were sent to hide in Pei Zhang's vulnerable manor.

Xiao Zai was exceptional at mimicking other people's voices. The general who ordered the emperor's soldiers to protect the emperor and kill the traitors wasn't the real general, it was Xiao Zai mimicking the general's voice. The real general was killed by one of the five hundred men long ago.

Pei Zhang's guards would want to protect their master. So it didn't matter whether Pei Zhang's army was approaching Pei Jin's manor to attack the emperor or not, the guards would attack the emperor's army to protect Pei Zhang.

Pei Jin expected the battle between Pei Zhang's men and the emperor's men. But he didn't order the five hundred men to attack. So the loud battle cries Pei Jin heard meant news of the battle was spread to Huang Guo and Huang Guo's army joined the chaos outside Pei Jin's manor.

Everyone inside Pei Jin's manor were focused on what was happening outside and lowered their guard against Pei Zhang.

Pei Zhang grabbed an imperial guard's sword, killed the imperial guard and held his father hostage.

'Seventh son, what do you want to do?' the emperor asked coldly.

'Imperial father, you forced me to do this,' Pei Zhang said. He held the sword closer to his father's throat. 'Everyone stand back!'

Pei Jin signalled for everyone not to make any sudden moves.

‘Seventh brother, let go of imperial father,’ Pei Jin said.

‘Ninth brother, I underestimated you!’ Pei Zhang said resentfully. ‘You hid your real capabilities well for many years!’

‘Seventh brother, even now you’re still stubborn,’ Pei Jin said.

‘Imperial father, you betrayed me first so you can’t blame me for betraying you,’ Pei Zhang said. ‘Imperial father, you loved tenth brother. Tenth brother is dead but you still treat me unfairly. You forced me to do this.’

Pei Zhang in his state of fury and resentment didn’t notice how close the sword was to his father’s throat.

Pei Jin saw drops of blood dripped down his father’s throat. ‘Seventh brother, let go of imperial father!’

Pei Zhang looked down at his father’s throat, he was startled to see blood and loosened his hold on the sword.

The emperor elbowed Pei Zhang’s chest while Pei Zhang was distracted and freed himself. He stabbed a sword through Pei Zhang’s stomach.

Pei Zhang didn’t know what happened. He felt pain in his stomach, vomited blood and died with his eyes wide opened.

Everyone gasped except the emperor who held a blood stained sword in his right hand.

Pei Jin’s heart farewell Pei Zhang, ‘seventh brother you finally know what happens if you oppose father.’

Suddenly Pei Jin remembered his imperial uncle’s memories of his father, ‘Xiao Jin, your imperial father was a general when he was young too. When an enemy general held him hostage, he freed himself and killed the enemy general.’

Pei Jin didn't know how he felt about Pei Zhang's death. If Pei Zhang truly wanted to kill their father then Pei Zhang wouldn't have been unguarded toward their father and given their father an opportunity to kill. But if Pei Zhang wanted to convince their father to believe in their innocence then Pei Zhang shouldn't have threatened their father. Pei Jin looked curiously at Pei Zhang's eyes, he wondered what the last thought of people who dared to threaten their father was.

Chapter 79

The emperor vomited blood.

Pei Zhang was dead. It was an unspoken understanding that Pei Jin was the unofficial crown prince.

The imperial guards escorted the emperor back to the palace.

The maids and servants cleaned Pei Jin's manor. But they were repulsed by Pei Zhang's blood.

Inside Pei Jin's chamber, Yan Shi Ning hugged Pei Jin. Her heart was overwhelmed with happiness and relief. She was happy and relieved her family survived that dangerous night.

'Pei Jin, did we win?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'Yes,' Pei Jin said.

'Pei Jin, when do you think imperial father's edict will be delivered?' Yan Shi Ning asked. 'He never wanted you to be crown prince. I don't think we should accept it.'

Although Pei Jin won, he didn't feel triumphant. He looked out the window and thought of the distant past. He wondered when he cared about the throne. Was it when his imperial uncle was alive? Or was it Huang Guo's continual persuasion?

Pei Jin struggled a lot in the past. He was grateful toward the people who silently helped him built his strengths. For years he hid his real self. If his father or his brothers detected his real self then between him and them the first person to die would have been him.

Even though Pei Jin's biggest rivals have fallen, he didn't know why he felt even more anxious.

The following day the court officials were surprised the emperor appeared in the imperial court after a night's ordeal.

The emperor sat arrogantly on his throne. He wanted everyone to know he was still the powerful emperor that couldn't be easily defeated.

There were many court officials missing that day. Some were killed during the night and others were locked in the palace dungeon awaiting execution.

Those court officials killed and detained were surprisingly supporters of ninth prince. The emperor replaced their positions with ordinary people.

The court officials who were spared shivered during the meeting until the emperor dismissed them.

The emperor wasn't foolish. He eliminated the biggest threats to his survival. As long as he and Pei Jin were alive, the threat of rebellion would exist unless he eliminated Pei Jin's supporters.

The court officials who escaped death and punishment walked outside the imperial court and were frightened to hear screams of torture.

'Where are the screams coming from?' the first official asked.

'Sounds like it's from the imperial physicians' chamber,' the second officials said.

'What?' the first official asked.

'It's death by a thousand cuts... the emperor hates anyone who deceives him,' the second official said.

They quickly returned to their manors to protect their heads.

Gentleman Tao was a gentleman. But he was unrecognisable after his flesh was slowly cut to pieces. Each time a piece of flesh fell off, the eunuchs were ordered to throw salt onto his exposed muscles under his skin.

The emperor knew one of his four trusted imperial physicians had exposed his plan. His imperial guards found secret letters Gentleman Tao wrote to Consort Mu so he awarded Gentleman Tao the harshest punishment, death by a thousand cuts.

Consort Mu was fearful throughout the night. She was anxious about Pei Zhang. She wanted to send her servants to see what was happening at Pei Zhang's manor, but the emperor's imperial guards detained her in her chamber and didn't let anyone enter or leave her chamber.

In the morning Consort Mu was the last to know Pei Zhang and his men were killed for treason. She didn't know what happened but she knew Pei Zhang died because of his biggest weakness, his impatience.

Consort Mu thought about escaping. But the emperor's imperial guards dragged her into Gentleman Tao's chamber and forced her to watch Gentleman Tao being cut to death. She knew she had no hope of escaping.

The emperor watched Consort Mu silently cried after Gentleman Tao died.

'I'm rewarding you three white fabrics,' the emperor said.

The emperor glanced scornfully at Consort Mu and left the chamber.

Pei Jin and Wang Fu Mu reacted differently to Gentleman Tao's punishment, they were relieved it wasn't them in Gentleman Tao's position.

Wang Fu Mu followed the emperor outside the chamber.

‘It was you!’ Consort Mu accused Pei Jin.

It didn’t matter if Consort Mu was intelligent, she was deceived many years by Pei Jin’s weak appearance.

‘Pei Jin, you’re a cruel man!’ Consort Mu said.

‘Thank you Consort Mu,’ Pei Jin said.

Consort Mu’s throat felt choked.

‘I’m only returning the cruelty you showed my family,’ Pei Jin said. ‘You killed Consort Chen, harmed my wife and son and tried to send me into death’s corner many times.’

‘Is this your revenge?’ Consort Mu asked.

Pei Jin didn’t deny Consort Mu’s accusation.

Consort Mu laughed coldly. ‘You think I killed Consort Chen?’

‘Who else can it be?’ Pei Jin asked. ‘You used Fu Gui to poison my wife, it’s the same poison you used to kill Consort Chen.’

‘Pei Jin, the person who killed Consort Chen wasn’t me,’ Consort Mu said. ‘It’s your imperial father.’

Pei Jin was shocked but he listened to Consort Mu’s recount of what happened to Consort Chen.

‘That year Huang Guo’s army was becoming too powerful,’ Consort Mu said. ‘Huang Guo planned a rebellion after Consort Chen was pregnant. Huang Guo was behind the assassination attempts on your imperial father’s life. Your imperial father survived and knew Consort Chen and her son must be killed otherwise Huang Guo would rebel if his grandson lived. Your imperial father used Fu Gui to kill Consort Mu and her son.’

Consort Mu laughed at Pei Jin’s shock. ‘Pei Jin, now you know who killed Consort Chen. What are you going to do to avenge her death?’

Pei Jin's whole body was cold.

'No one completely won this battle,' Consort Mu said. 'But I lost my son because your scheme is more treacherous than mine. So you win and I die. Pei Jin, you should be cautious, your imperial father hates to be deceived. If he knows you deceived him, you'll die more pitifully than us!'

Pei Jin regained his composure. 'Thank you mother for reminding me.'

Pei Jin left the chamber.

A while later the white fabrics choked Consort Mu to death.

Chapter 80

The emperor visited the empress and the crown prince's old chambers.

The emperor didn't love the empress but he never had to worry the empress would attempt to kill him. Out of his sons, he only loved his and the empress' son. Pei Lam would never stab a sword at his throat. But the empress and Pei Lam were no longer with him. Pei Zhang's betrayal was another stab to his heart.

The emperor didn't understand why whoever he wanted to be the crown prince would die. His tenth son and seventh son were gone... only his ninth son was left who he could give the throne to before he died.

The thought of Pei Jin made the emperor reminisced about his youth. When he was young he loved peace and quiet so he only allowed at most two palace maids to serve him.

The emperor remembered that night clearly. His young self was reading in the calligraphy room. Suddenly his body turned hot, he raised his head and saw a young palace maid was pouring tea. He stood and

pushed her onto the table... after he woke up she was gone. He thought she was only a palace maid so he let that night go.

The emperor suspected he drank lust herbs and an imperial physician confirmed his suspicions.

Two months later a eunuch reported to the emperor a palace maid wanted to tell him something important... it was the palace from that night, she was pregnant. At that time he had a wife, many consorts and concubines. But only his seventh son survived. So he prepared a chamber for the palace maid during her pregnancy.

The emperor was ashamed of himself for impregnating a lowly palace maid. But he didn't hate the palace maid. She was gentle, knew her status and was caring toward other people. He thought if she gave him a son then he would consider marrying her and she would become one of his consorts. But later he found out she wasn't as gentle and kind as he thought, she had ulterior motives.

When the palace maid was four months pregnant she didn't want the emperor to spend time with his wives. She planned to feed him a weak poison so he would be bedridden while she was pregnant.

Unfortunately for her, an imperial physician discovered her plan and she lost the emperor's trust.

The last five months of the palace maid's pregnancy, she behaved and didn't cause any trouble to show the emperor she was remorseful. It was a pity the emperor no longer trusted her. If she had hid her ulterior motives well then the emperor would have given her a carefree life.

The palace maid thought the emperor would forgive her after she gave birth to a prince. She didn't expect the emperor secretly killed her for deceiving him.

The emperor didn't remember what the palace maid looked like but he remembered she had gentle eyes like their son, Pei Jin. Everyone thought Pei Jin's mother died during childbirth, but he had ordered an assassin to kill Pei Jin's mother. He would never allow someone who

deceived him to stay by his side. Although he killed Pei Jin's mother, he couldn't kill Pei Jin. Pei Jin's mother had no powerful family connections so at that time Pei Jin wasn't a threat to him.

The emperor thought he could love Pei Jin. But as Pei Jin grew older, Pei Jin only became an eyesore. Each time he looked at Pei Jin it reminded him of his mother's deceit and that not everything could be within his control.

The emperor felt mentally tired thinking about Pei Jin's mother and the eyesore Pei Jin. He sat down on the empress' old bed and rested for a while. His eyes noticed words were written on a corner of the bed... 'Pei Jin killed me and the crown prince.'

The emperor recognised the calligraphy belonged to the empress. If Pei Jin was the killer then he was deceived for many years!

The court officials and everyone at Pei Jin's manor awaited the emperor's edict for many days. During those days Pei Jin attended meetings in the imperial court in the mornings and afterward he would spend time with his family at home.

Finally the emperor sent a messenger to Pei Jin's manor and requested Pei Jin to see the emperor in the imperial calligraphy room for a private meeting.

Yan Shi Ning helped Pei Jin changed clothes behind a screen.

'Pei Jin, what do you think imperial father wants to say to you?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

Pei Jin kissed Yan Shi Ning's lips. 'Shi Ning, you don't have to worry.'

'Go there quickly and come back quickly,' Yan Shi Ning said.

Pei Jin nodded his head and he travelled to the palace by horse carriage.

Everyone at the palace smiled at Pei Jin and they wanted to gain his favor. Pei Jin ignored them and he walked toward the imperial calligraphy room.

Pei Jin was anxious, he didn't know if his father wanted to interrogate him or promote him.

Pei Jin entered the imperial calligraphy room. His father sat on the highest chair while Pei Khan stood and looked at him cryptically.

'Ninth brother,' Pei Khan said.

Pei Jin didn't expect Pei Khan would be in the imperial calligraphy room as well.

'Thirteenth son, have you memorised the words your teacher taught you?' the emperor asked.

'Imperial father, I still need to improve my calligraphy,' Pei Khan said.

Pei Khan sat and he continued practicing his calligraphy.

Pei Jin knew after their father found out Pei Khan was intelligent and could speak, their father assigned a teacher for Pei Khan. But seeing Pei Khan practicing calligraphy in the imperial calligraphy room reminded Pei Jin of the past. Their father supervised Pei Lam practicing calligraphy when Pei Lam was the same age as Pei Khan. Pei Jin wasn't given the same treatment when he was younger, their father didn't care about his education.

'Ninth son, in the future I'll leave Dian Kingdom to you,' the emperor said.

Pei Jin didn't expect his father would give him the throne in such a direct manner.

'Don't you want to?' the emperor asked.

'Imperial father, I fear I'm not suited for such heavy responsibilities,' Pei Jin said.

The emperor smiled. 'If you're not suitable then who else is left that is suitable?'

Pei Jin's body turned cold, he didn't understand what his father's words meant.

'Ninth son, I'm not young anymore,' the emperor said. 'I only have a few days left... thirteenth son is still young. Ninth son, I'll leave your thirteenth brother in yours and your wife's care. I know both of you love your thirteenth brother.'

'Yes, imperial father,' Pei Jin said.

'Thirteenth son, pour your ninth brother a cup of tea,' the emperor said. 'In the future you need to listen to your ninth brother.'

Pei Jin was anxious why his father acted different than usual. In the past his father was never that gentle toward him. He wondered if his father truly let go of everything before his father died.

Pei Khan's face paled. He remembered what he overheard earlier that day.

Pei Khan was playing with the cuju ball Yan Shi Ning made for him. He accidentally kicked the cuju ball in his father's chamber. No one was allowed inside his father's chamber without permission. He looked in four directions, no one was around so he quickly entered his father's chamber to retrieve the cuju ball. Before he could leave, he heard footsteps and quickly hid under the bed. It was his father's footsteps. He waited a long time for his father to leave and felt sleepy. When he was about to sleep, he was startled by his father's words, 'ninth son, I won't spare you!'

Pei Khan didn't understand what his father's words meant but his father's harsh tone scared him.

'Ninth son, you killed your brothers!' the emperor said. 'So I'll force your brother to kill you! You're not the only son left!'

Pei Khan was startled. He didn't know what happened and why his father wanted to kill Pei Jin.

A while later Pei Khan left his father's chamber undetected and his teacher taught him how to write more words. He couldn't sit still during the lesson. Then his father asked him to practice in the imperial calligraphy room. He couldn't memorise any of the words he learnt because he was worried about how his father intended to kill Pei Jin.

Pei Khan thought about what he overheard his father said. He suspected his father poisoned the tea in the calligraphy room and wanted him to be the person who killed Pei Jin.

Pei Khan's shaky hands held the warm cup of tea that felt too heavy. What was he supposed to do? On one side was his father and on the other side of him was his brother. He didn't want Pei Jin to die.

Pei Khan purposely walked slowly and his eyes silently warned Pei Jin not to drink the poisoned tea.

Pei Jin thought Pei Khan was acting strange. But he accepted the cup of tea from Pei Khan and pretended to drink the tea.

Pei Jin raised his head and he was startled to see tears flowed down from Pei Khan's eyes.

The cup of tea fell out of Pei Jin's hand. There was a deadly poison inside the tea.

'It was you who killed them!' the emperor said.

Pei Jin realised his father found out about his past schemes.

'You hid your real cruel self for many years!' the emperor said. 'You killed your brothers! Did you think you can sit carefree on the throne? I should have killed you from the start!'

‘Imperial father, you killed your brothers and stole the throne from your younger brother,’ Pei Jin said. ‘Have you ever once sat carefree on the throne in the last thirty years?’

The emperor’s face whitened and he clutched his chest.

Pei Jin laughed coldly. ‘Imperial father, who are you to criticize me? Isn’t it true you changed imperial grandfather’s edict to your name instead of imperial uncle’s name? Your hands are stained with your brothers’ blood too.’

‘You!’ the emperor said.

The emperor didn’t expect Pei Jin knew the truth.

‘Did you do this to avenge your imperial uncle?’ the emperor asked. He gritted his teeth and remembered how Pei Jin was close to his younger brother in the past. ‘Don’t forget, I’m your imperial father!’

‘Imperial father?’ Pei Jin asked. ‘I’ve always seen you as my imperial father. But have you ever once seen me as your son?’

Pei Jin looked coldly at the broken tea cup. ‘Earlier you intended for me to die. Is this how you see me as your son?’

‘You deserve to die!’ the emperor said. ‘You killed your tenth brother, the empress and you framed your seventh brother!’

‘Did you want to kill me because you loved tenth brother?’ Pei Jin asked. ‘Or is it because you hate being deceived and feeling everything is outside of your control?’

The emperor braced his hands on the table.

‘Imperial father, you’re unjust,’ Pei Jin said. ‘Why do you hate me?’

The emperor looked at Pei Jin’s eyes. Each time he looked into Pei Jin’s eyes he was reminded of the scum who deceived him. Then he would wonder if Pei Jin was like Pei Jin’s mother and scheme against him too. As Pei Jin grew older, Pei Jin acted gentle and kind like Pei Jin’s mother.

The more he couldn't see through Pei Jin the more he hated Pei Jin. Pei Jin being close to his younger brother intensified his hatred of Pei Jin.

'I didn't kill tenth brother,' Pei Jin said. 'Tenth brother faked his own death because he hated his life in the palace. I only brought him back to the imperial city and kept him captive. He was tired of living and killed himself. As for seventh brother, if he didn't have bad intentions to kill me and my family then he would never have fallen into my trap. Imperial father, you clearly know this kind of battle can only have one winner. I only want to survive and live with my wife and son.'

'Don't think for a moment that I'll believe you!' the emperor said. 'I'll never believe you! Someone! Arrest him!'

Wang Fu Mu entered the room. 'Your majesty.'

'Where are the imperial guards?' the emperor asked.

'There are no imperial guards,' Wang Fu Mu said.

The emperor saw Pei Jin stood upright and his back turned cold.

'Wang Fu Mu, you've been secretly serving him!' the emperor said.

'Ninth prince is a good master,' Wang Fu Mu said.

'Do the two of you want to commit treason?' the emperor asked.

'Treason?' Wang Fu Mu asked.

Wang Fu Mu was suspicious why the emperor isolated himself and didn't let anyone come near the emperor. After he heard the emperor wanted to see Pei Jin privately, he suspected the emperor wanted to kill Pei Jin.

Wang Fu Mu wanted to protect Pei Jin so he lied to the imperial guards the emperor wanted them to guard the palace gates. Of course the imperial guards wouldn't dare go against the emperor's orders and they believed Wang Fu Mu wouldn't dare to lie about the emperor's orders.

Pei Jin knew his father wouldn't ask all his imperial guards to guard the palace gates and leave his father vulnerable to an attack from inside the palace. Then he thought it was Wang Fu Mu's way of warning him. He didn't know how his father intended to kill him. Whether his father would stab him like he stabbed Pei Zhang or poison him like his father poisoned imperial uncle. After he entered the calligraphy room and saw the teapot he realised his father wanted to poison him.

'What is it?' the emperor asked. 'You don't dare to kill me? If you don't kill me then how will you climb onto the throne? Even if you want to be the emperor, you shouldn't dream about it!'

'Imperial father, I don't want to be the emperor,' Pei Jin said. 'I only want to be your son.'

Pei Jin knelt in front of his father, hit his forehead on the floor, stood and left the room.

The emperor watched Pei Jin's back powerlessly. He collapsed on the floor and vomited blood.

Wang Fu Mu wanted to help the emperor stand but the emperor glared at him coldly.

'Wang Fu Mu, have I mistreated you?' the emperor asked.

'Your majesty is good to me but ninth prince is good to me too,' Wang Fu Mu said.

The emperor silently stood and sat.

Pei Jin left the palace. He didn't know why his father let him leave without killing him. Inside his sleeve was a hidden poisoned dart contraption. Earlier if his father had picked up a sword when he was kneeling then he wouldn't hesitate to release the dart.

That summer the emperor died.

Pei Jin announced the emperor's final edict, 'Thirteenth prince will become the emperor at the age of sixteen. Ninth prince will rule in thirteenth prince's stead until thirteenth prince turns sixteen.'

What the citizens of the Dian Kingdom didn't know was Pei Jin was secretly exceptional at mimicking other people's calligraphy, especially his father's calligraphy.

Chapter 81

Ten years later Pei Khan ruled the Dian Kingdom.

Pei Khan sat on the throne and looked sadly at Pei Jin who was kneeling in front of him.

'Your majesty, let me deal with the rebellion in Southern Jiang,' Pei Jin said.

Pei Khan's eyes stung, he didn't want Pei Jin and Pei Jin's family to leave the imperial city. He understood Pei Jin trusted him to rule on his own and that two tigers couldn't stay on one mountain.

'Yes,' Pei Khan said reluctantly.

Later Pei Khan and the court officials farewell Pei Jin and Pei Jin's family. Some court officials were sad to see Pei Jin leave and some were happy to get rid of the biggest threat to Pei Khan's rule.

Inside the horse carriage Pei Xiao Niao woke up from his nap. He rubbed his eyes and he was happy to see his imperial uncle.

'Imperial uncle, I waited a long time to see you,' Pei Xiao Niao said. 'Why aren't you coming inside carriage?'

Pei Khan rubbed his precious nephew's head. 'I can't go with you now. Xiao Niao, you go first. I'll visit you soon.'

'Why can't we go together?' Pei Xiao Niao asked.

‘Because I need to stay back to be the emperor,’ Pei Khan said.

‘Then why don’t imperial uncle not be the emperor anymore and come with me?’ Pei Xiao Niao asked.

The court officials’ faces paled.

‘That’s a good suggestion,’ Pei Khan said.

The court officials’ faces whitened.

‘But these uncles won’t agree,’ Pei Khan said.

Pei Xiao Niao looked hatefully at the court officials.

‘Imperial uncle, is it amusing being the emperor?’ Pei Xiao Niao asked.

‘Not amusing at all,’ Pei Khan said.

‘Imperial uncle, let’s share our sufferings and blessings,’ Pei Xiao Niao said sternly. ‘I’ll play in Southern Jiang for a while. Then I’ll come back to the imperial city to be the emperor and imperial uncle can go to Southern Jiang to play.’

Pei Khan’s eyes brightened. ‘Um, it’s a promise!’

The court officials wanted to vomit blood. They got rid of Pei Jin but they couldn’t stop Pei Jin’s son from returning and being the emperor.

Pei Xiao Niao waved his small hands until he couldn’t see his imperial uncle anymore and he couldn’t stop crying.

‘Mother, I can’t see imperial uncle anymore,’ Pei Xiao Niao said sadly.

Pei Wen Rui knocked her older brother’s head. ‘First brother, don’t you know how to be embarrassed? You’re too old to cry.’

Pei Xiao Niao cried louder because his little sister bullied him again.

‘Second sister, you shouldn’t bully first brother,’ Pei Wen Hui said. ‘First brother, you shouldn’t wipe your snot on second sister’s dress.’

Pei Wen Hui looked down at his older brother.

Pei Xiao Niao looked out the window and missed his imperial uncle more because his little sister and little brother joined forces to bully him. His father loved Xiao Rui and his mother loved Xiao Hui. Only his imperial uncle loved him. He cried more pitifully as the horse carriage travelled further away from the imperial city.

Pei Jin looked at his three lively children and he smiled.

‘Shi Ning, should we conceive another child?’ Pei Jin asked.

‘No!’ Yan Shi Ning said.

Yan Shi Ning thought her youngest son was good and obedient. Her oldest son and daughter were fire and water, they gave her a headache. But Pei Khan was the most behaved and helpful when Pei Khan was her children’s ages. She worried about leaving Pei Khan on his own in the imperial city.

‘Pei Jin, do you think Pei Khan can cope on his own in the imperial city?’ Yan Shi Ning asked.

‘Shi Ning, you should believe in Pei Khan’s capabilities,’ Pei Jin said.

Yan Shi Ning nodded her head. Pei Khan was the most suited to be the emperor even more suitable than Pei Jin. Pei Khan was fair, merciful, decisive and calm under pressure.

Pei Jin believed Pei Khan would be a good emperor. The last ten years were tiring for him and he was happy he finally could live a peaceful life with his family away from the palace.

‘Pei Jin, have you ever regretted giving up the throne?’ Yan Shi Ning asked.

‘Shi Ning, have you ever resented me for not giving you the opportunity for the world to admire you?’ Pei Jin asked.

‘What do you think?’ Yan Shi Ning asked.

‘Wife, it appears you don’t like being admired and you hate palace protocols,’ Pei Jin said. ‘So your husband is willing to give up the world to make you happy. Besides, your husband never cared about power and money.’

‘Husband, will you die if don’t pretend to be a gentle and kind person?’ Yan Shi Ning asked.

Pei Jin smiled and kissed Yan Shi Ning.

Pei Xiao Niao turned his head away from the window and saw his parents were kissing each other again. He shook his head. ‘Father, mother, do you know how old you both are? Father, mother, don’t you both know how to control yourselves?’

Pei Wen Rui knocked her older brother’s head. ‘First brother, move your head out of the way.’

Pei Xiao Niao rubbed his sore head and cried. ‘Second sister, you hit me again.’

Pei Wen Hui ignored his noisy older brother and older sister. He silently chewed on melon seeds.

In the palace Pei Khan stood above the tallest tower where no one could see him cry while he watched the horse carriage slowly disappear.

Side Story One

Yan Shi Ning loved living in Southern Jiang because the four seasons were like spring.

Yan Shi Ning felt like a free fish meeting water. Each day she didn’t have to pretend to be a gentle lady. She ate, drank wine and laughed happily.

Everyone in Southern Jiang loved and respected Yan Shi Ning's husband. So Yan Shi Ning was invited to many banquets.

Pei Jin wasn't happy his wife neglected him to go to banquets and play.

Pei Jin drank wine at Elder Ma's manor to forget his wife neglected him. The past year compensated his ten years of hard work. He didn't need to scheme and battle. Anyone who saw his flushed red cheeks would have thought he was a carefree person. But his little lion had been away from home for a few days to attend a banquet, he felt neglected and lonely without her.

'Ninth prince, you don't like the musicians' performance?' Elder Ma asked. 'I'm not surprised. I've listened to them performed many times so there's a lost element of surprise.'

Pei Jin laughed. 'Elder Ma, if you didn't like listening to them then you wouldn't invite them to perform in your manor.'

'It's because I have too many silver taels,' Elder Ma said.

Elder Ma was the richest person in Southern Jiang and also the person who was robbed the most. Decades ago Elder Ma was held hostage and Prince Chen Nan rescued Elder Ma. Since that day Elder Ma saw Prince Chen Nan as his blood brother. After Elder Ma met Prince Chen Nan's beloved nephew Pei Jin, Elder Ma saw Pei Jin as his blood son.

Elder Ma would do anything for Pei Jin from loaning him an army to protect him to encouraging him to become the emperor. So after he heard the old emperor passed the throne to Pei Khan, Elder Ma cursed the old emperor for three days and three nights. Later he found out Pei Jin changed the old emperor's edict so he cursed Pei Jin instead of the old emperor. But he was happy after ten years, his beloved Pei Jin returned to Southern Jiang.

'Ninth prince, I have a treasure I want to show you,' Elder Ma said deviously.

'What else is there?' Pei Jin asked suspiciously.

‘Ninth prince, this time your eyes will certainly widen,’ Elder Ma said.

Elder Ma clapped his hands and the musicians played a sensual tune.

At the peak of the sensual tune, beautiful belly dancers appeared in front of Elder Ma and Pei Jin. Pei Jin’s eyes widened, the way the young women were dressed would make anyone look up at the sky. The young women’s white stomachs were exposed and they danced bare feet. They wore two pieces of thin undergarments and on their chests were flower tattoos.

Elder Ma grinned while he watched Pei Jin attentively watched the belly dances sway their bodies to the sensual tune. Elder Ma was pleased Pei Jin was acting like a man. Elder Ma didn’t think it was natural for a man like Pei Jin to have only one wife.

Elder Ma was always dissatisfied why Pei Jin didn’t want to marry young and have many wives. In the past Elder Ma even offered his daughters to Pei Jin, but Pei Jin politely declined and told Elder Ma that Pei Jin’s heart was occupied. So Elder Ma cursed the nine tailed fox Yan Shi Ning for putting Pei Jin under her trance. But later Elder Ma heard about Yan Shi Ning’s deeds and Elder Ma’s heart softened toward her until Yan Shi Ning refused to give Pei Jin more children after Yan Shi Ning and Pei Jin’s third child. Elder Ma didn’t think three children were enough. Elder Ma thought Yan Shi Ning should at least give Pei Jin ten children. That was why Elder Ma encouraged Pei Jin to marry other women so they would give Pei Jin more children. But Pei Jin refused all the women Elder Ma introduced to him. That day Elder Ma thought finally after patiently waiting for many years, Elder Ma thought his efforts weren’t wasted.

The banquet Yan Shi Ning attended ended and she returned home. But the maids reported to her that Pei Jin didn’t stay home while she was away for a few days.

‘Wen Hui, how many days has your father been away from home?’ Yan Shi Ning asked.

Pei Wen Hui fed his mother melon seeds. 'Three days. Father left Xiao Zai to play with me.'

Yan Shi Ning frowned and looked at Xiao Zai. 'Where did ninth prince go?'

Xiao Hui pinched Xiao Zai. 'Mistress asked you a question.'

'Confess,' Yan Shi Ning said.

'At Elder Ma...' Xiao Zai said.

'Continue,' Yan Shi Ning said.

Xiao Zai cried. 'Ninth prince, forbid me to say.'

Yan Shi Ning smiled coldly. 'That's good he forbids you to say.'

'Mistress, if it's you who wants to know then I'm willing to say... but mistress can't let ninth prince know I said anything to you otherwise-' Xiao Zai said.

'Confess!' Yan Shi Ning said.

'Elder Ma brought exotic young women dancers into Elder Ma's manor,' Xiao Zai said. 'Ninth prince was mesmerized enough to forget about the sky and ground and ninth prince refused to come home.'

'That's good ninth prince forgot the sky and ground,' Yan Shi Ning said coldly.

Yan Shi Ning entered Elder Ma's manor. She saw Pei Jin was drinking wine and smiling while the half-dressed young women danced around him.

Pei Jin turned his head around and saw Yan Shi Ning was striding outside. His back stiffened, he stood and chased after her.

'Shi Ning, Shi Ning!' Pei Jin called.

Pei Jin realised Yan Shi Ning was seriously angry at him. He ran home. She didn't hit or curse him, she had disappeared.

Pei Jin interrogated Xiao Hui. 'What forgot the sky and ground? If I don't find my wife, Xiao Zai await your punishment!'

Pei Jin searched anxiously for Yan Shi Ning around their home.

'Xiao Hui, why did you betray me?' Xiao Zai asked.

'It's your fault for hurting me last night,' Xiao Hui said.

'What pain?' Xiao Zai said. 'Don't say it in a way that will mislead other people! Last night I only scrubbed your back! Ninth prince is going to kill me!'

Pei Jin rode a horse after the servants informed him that Yan Shi Ning was at the villa she bought.

At Yan Shi Ning's villa she knew Pei Jin would easily find her. Since she bought the villa, the servants and maids listened to her and refused to let Pei Jin inside.

Pei Jin stood outside Yan Shi Ning's villa and cried out until his throat was hoarse but no one opened the door for him. He realised Yan Shi Ning misunderstood him and she didn't want to see him. He cursed Xiao Zai's careless mouth! If Yan Shi Ning refused to see him then how could he resolve the misunderstanding?

Yan Shi Ning was sleeping while Pei Jin was screaming outside. She was tired after playing for a few days. She dreamt she cut Pei Jin into a thousand pieces. When she dreamt about her and Xiao Tu eating dried dates, she was awoken by a noise outside the window.

Yan Shi Ning didn't hesitate to throw a pillow out the window. Only a bandit would crawl through a person's window at the hour of the tiger.

'Ah... Yan Shi Ning, do you want to kill your husband?' Pei Jin asked.

Yan Shi Ning leaned over the window and she saw Pei Jin fell into a bush and rubbed his sore head. The height difference between the window and the ground was higher than the height difference between her old chamber window at the Yan Manor and the ground.

Yan Shi Ning helped Pei Jin lay on the bed.

‘Shi Ning, you’re crueller by the day,’ Pei Jin said. ‘Do you hate me?’

‘I didn’t know it was you,’ Yan Shi Ning said.

‘Who else would dare crawl into your chamber in the middle of night?’ Pei Jin asked. ‘Shi Ning, I’m not as young as I used to be. Falling from a window at my age is painful to death. Is this your way of bullying me?’

‘Pei Jin...’ Yan Shi Ning said.

‘Um?’ Pei Jin asked.

‘Who are you acting for?’ Yan Shi Ning asked.

‘What acting?’ Pei Jin asked. ‘Wife, it hurts...’

Yan Shi Ning scoffed. Earlier the MF Pei Jin scared her to death but he wasn’t in real pain.

Pei Jin hugged Yan Shi Ning before she could leave. ‘Shi Ning, don’t be angry. Let me explain.’

Yan Shi Ning knew it was useless for her to struggle and let Pei Jin hug her.

‘Shi Ning, I’m innocent so don’t listen to Xiao Zai’s nonsense,’ Pei Jin said. ‘We’ve been married for many years. Don’t you trust me?’

Yan Shi Ning ignored Pei Jin.

Pei Jin’s hand wandered down Yan Shi Ning’s dress. She grabbed his hand and bit hard. He retaliated and bit her neck.

‘Shi Ning, you’re heartless,’ Pei Jin said.

‘What are you going to do?’ Yan Shi Ning asked.

Pei Jin smiled. ‘Nothing. Shi Ning, I’m truly innocent. I know you’re insecure about the scar on your chest. So I stayed at Elder’s manor for a few days to learn how to tattoo from the women. If you don’t believe me you can ask them. I can also show you I’m telling the truth...’

Pei Jin’s erection pressed between Yan Shi Ning’s thighs.

Yan Shi Ning knew Pei Jin wouldn’t sleep with other women. In the last ten years in the imperial city, many women tried to get close to Pei Jin but he heartlessly pushed them away. If Pei Jin wanted to sleep with other women then he would have years ago. She only ran to her villa to punish Pei Jin a little because he exhausted her body day and night since they arrived in Southern Jiang a year ago.

‘Confess, how did you enter my villa?’ Yan Shi Ning asked.

‘Shi Ning, do you remember how five hundred men disappeared?’ Pei Jin asked.

Yan Shi Ning’s eyes widened. ‘What? You asked them to dig a tunnel?’

Pei Jin nodded his head. ‘It’s your fault for not letting me inside your villa.’

More than ten years ago Pei Jin commanded his Southern Jiang army to dig an underground tunnel to the enemy army’s camp base and he threatened to ignite cannon balls if the enemy army didn’t surrender. The enemy army surrendered and Pei Jin kept his strategy a secret. Later he used the same strategy against Pei Zhang. Of course five hundred men couldn’t disappear. The five hundred men moved through the concealed underground tunnel to Pei Zhang’s manor.

Yan Shi Ning was speechless. She couldn’t believe Pei Jin truly wanted to see her enough to use the tunnel strategy for the third time.

‘Wife... do you want to...’ Pei Jin asked.

Pei Jin took off his and Yan Shi Ning’s clothes and showed her how much he missed her.

After that night, Pei Jin failed to tattoo Yan Shi Ning’s chest for many days. Each time he took off her clothes, he ate her.

Many days past and finally he tattooed a flower on Yan Shi Ning’s chest.

Yan Shi Ning looked at the tattooed flower on her chest. Her eyes widened after she also saw ‘Jin’ was tattooed on her chest. Pei Jin explained, ‘it’s a way for me to recognise you in our next lives.’

‘What next life?’ Yan Shi Ning asked. ‘You’ve troubled me enough in this life.’

Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning both knew their true feelings for each other.

The autumn Pei Jin was an eighty-year-old man, he laid next to Yan Shi Ning in bed, closed his eyes and died in his sleep.

‘MF Pei Jin, why didn’t you wait for me?’ Yan Shi Ning whispered in Pei Jin’s ear, closed her eyes and died in her sleep that night too.

Short Side Story Six

Pei Xiao Niao’s first birthday:

Pei Xiao Niao didn’t want to stop drinking his mother’s breastmilk and gave his father a headache.

Pei Jin’s eyes brightened and he secretly rubbed chili powder on Yan Shi Ning’s breasts.

Pei Xiao Niao suckled his mother’s breast and cried pitifully.

‘Xiao Niao, before you were born your mother made me suffer the same way,’ Pei Jin said.

Pei Xiao Niao’s second birthday:

Bei Dou and Xiao Tu’s first son was born, Bei Dai Sheng.

Pei Xiao Niao was eating a chili bun. He was curious to see Bei Dai Sheng sleep inside a cot. He broke a piece of chili bun and put it in Bei Dai Sheng’s mouth. Afterward Bei Dai Sheng cried loudly and Pei Jin hit Pei Xiao Niao’s bottom.

Pei Xiao Niao cried loudly. ‘Father, I only wanted to let little brother Dai Sheng to taste the bun.’

Pei Xiao Niao’s fourth birthday:

Pei Xiao Niao didn’t want to learn to read and write.

Pei Jin was angry and threw the ink brush. ‘Forget about you.’

Pei Xiao Niao ran to his imperial uncle. ‘Father scolded me.’

‘You deserved to be scolded,’ Pei Khan said.

Pei Xiao Niao cried loudly.

Pei Xiao Niao’s sixth birthday:

Pei Wen Rui was born. Pei Jin loved Pei Wen Rui because Pei Wen Rui had Yan Shi Ning’s smile.

Pei Xiao Niao was unhappy his father loved Pei Wen Rui. So he drank the milk prepared for Pei Wen Rui and his father hit his bottom. He fisted his small hands and decided to rebel.

Pei Xiao Niao packed a few of his belongings and looked for Bei Dai Sheng.

'My father hits me and my mother doesn't love me, I'm running away from home,' Pei Xiao Niao said.

Bei Dai Sheng silently ate dried dates.

'I'm going to live with imperial uncle in the palace,' Pei Xiao Niao said.

Pei Xiao Niao's eighth birthday:

Pei Xiao Niao saw a beautiful jade seal on his imperial uncle's table in the imperial calligraphy room. He picked it up, played with it for a while and lost it. His imperial uncle hit his bottom because it was the imperial jade seal.

Pei Xiao Niao's tenth birthday:

Pei Xiao Niao cried all the way to Southern Jiang because he didn't want to be separated from his imperial uncle.

In Southern Jiang Pei Xiao Niao wrote many letters to his imperial uncle.

'Imperial uncle, it's amusing to play in Southern Jiang. Imperial uncle, should come here to play too.'

'Imperial uncle, it's been raining for half a month. If imperial uncle doesn't come soon then my eyes will turn to dust.'

'Imperial uncle, today Pei Wen Rui hit me again. Imperial uncle, come and rescue me.'

'Imperial uncle, today is my birthday. The citizens in Southern Jiang believe if I make a wish on my birthday then my wish will come true. I wish imperial uncle is here with me.'

'They are liars!'

Pei Xiao Niao's fourteenth birthday:

‘Imperial uncle, Pei Wen Rui and I can’t live together under the same sky! I’m going to run away from home. Imperial uncle, I’ll see you in the palace soon.’

Pei Xiao Niao packed his belongings and ran back to the imperial city.